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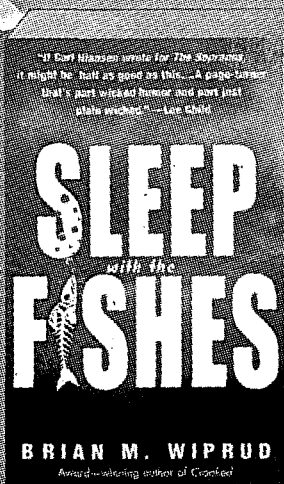
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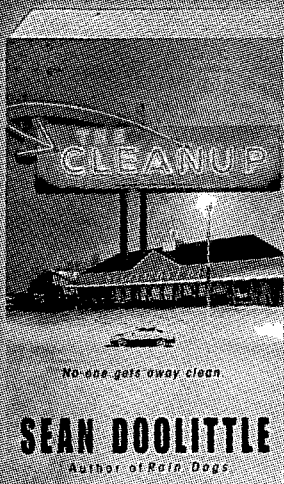
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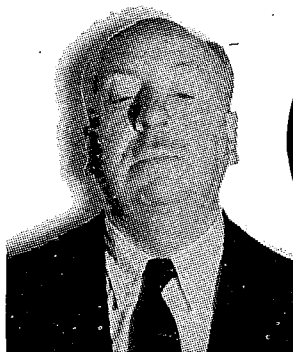
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LINDA LANDRIGAN

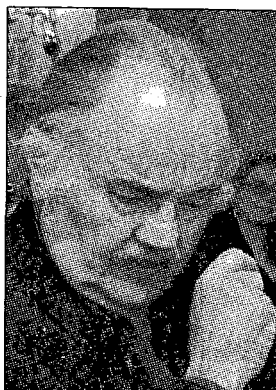
IN THE COMPANY OF SCHEMERS

With this issue we reach our golden anniversary: The first issue of AHMM was published in December 1956. Regular readers know that we have been celebrating this milestone all year, with reprints of favorite stories from past issues and the publication of a commemorative anthology, *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine Presents Fifty Years of Crime and Suspense*, published in June by Pegasus Books. We are convinced that AHMM's longevity is attributable to the wonderful authors we have had the pleasure of publishing over the years. The afternoon before the Edgar awards this spring, we had an opportunity to pay tribute to those authors at our annual cocktail party (cohosted by our sister magazine *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*). The pictures here are of some of the illustrious faces in that crowd. And to all our authors and readers, thank you for fifty years of support!



(Above) Eve Allyn (wife of Doug Allyn), Margaret Marón, and S. J. Rozan; (Bottom left) Doug Allyn; (Bottom right) Edward D. and Patricia Hoch.





(Above) Lois and John F. Dobbyn;
(Top right) Ron Goulart; (Right)
Jeremiah Healy and Tom Savage;
(Below) Claiborne Hancock, publisher
of Pegasus Books, and Otto Penzler,
proprietor of The Mysterious Bookshop
in New York City.



(Above right) Judy
Downer, former assistant
editor at AHMM and
wife of Alan Gordon,
right; (Right) Abigail
Browning, Dell Magazines
Subsidiary Rights and
Marketing Manager, and
James Lincoln Warren.





(Above) From left, Peter Kanter, Publisher of Dell Magazines, Eve Allyn, and K.j.a. Wishnia; (Below left) Nicole Sia, AHMM Editorial Assistant, and Charles Ardai, publisher of Hard Case Crime. (Below right) Parnell Hall and Jim Weikart.



(Left) Dell Magazines art and advertising departments, from left: Victoria Green, Senior Art Director; Connie Goon, Advertising Sales Coordinator; Shirley Chan Levi, Art Production Associate; Julia McEvoy, Advertising Sales Manager.

Correction: The credit line accompanying Jim Fusilli's story "Shatterproof" in the October issue should have read "Copyright © 1988 by Jim Fusilli; originally published in AHMM April, 1988. Reprinted by permission of the author."

THE SWEET SCIENCE

JOHN F. DOBBYN

I finally found the address—no mean feat in the bowels of that Irish enclave north of Boston called Charlestown. I'd been here once before, but it was always a challenge.

I pulled up to the curb in front of a building with a sign that declared through a half century of grime, SULLIVAN'S GYM. Whether it implied some ancient connection with "The Boston Strong-boy," the great John L. Sullivan of the bare-fist days, is anyone's guess.

I stayed in the car with the motor running. I figured this was not a place where you parked and left a Corvette with any serious hope of seeing it intact or at all.

Being in this old neighborhood brought back the first time I was introduced to Matt Flaherty. It was about two years earlier. My senior partner in the law firm of Devlin and Knight, Mr. Lex Devlin, had hauled my uninspired carcass, worn from a day of courtroom combat defending some worthy charged with aggravated assault, down to the neighborhood of Monument and Pearl streets on a mission.

I remember Mr. Devlin pointing to a third floor window in one of the tenements and announcing with a certain pride that he was born in that room. He pointed to a window in the next tenement and announced with greater pride that Matthew Flaherty was born in that room the following week.

My response was an uninspired, "I see."

He gave me that quizzical look and said, "You're showing a remarkable lack of enthusiasm, Michael."

"It's the best I can do, Mr. Devlin. My enthusiasm hasn't been fed since breakfast, and I haven't the foggiest idea of who Michael Flaherty is."

"Matthew Flaherty, lad, and I intend to cure that gap in your education this very night."

He led me through the tired old door on complaining hinges that



opened into Sullivan's Gym. The din of leather smacking every shape of punching bag seemed the right accompaniment to the pungent wave of sweat, ancient and modern, that stung the nostrils.

We walked to the side of the center ring where a couple of heavyweight boxers were hammering each other at close range. When the bell rang and the gloves and sparring helmets came off, Mr. Devlin introduced me to one of the fighters, the aforementioned Matthew Flaherty. My first shock was that a man of Mr. Devlin's vintage, somewhere in the middle seventies, was in condition to give and take the punishment I'd just seen handed out in the ring. My second shock came when the aging pugilist had showered and dressed and rejoined us in the full dress of a Catholic priest. That was over two years ago. I hadn't seen Father Flaherty since then.

On the button of five o'clock, Mr. Devlin's five-year-old Lincoln Town Car pulled up behind me. I went back and opened the car door for him out of respect for the difference between his seventy-plus years and my twenty-eight.

He sprang his two-hundred-pound frame out of the car with an agility that made me think he should be opening the door for me. After eight hours of fending off the legal spitballs of a prosecutor in the criminal session of Suffolk County Court, I had been ready to wilt into three fingers of The Famous Grouse scotch and twenty ounces of strip steak. That inspiring thought died on the vine when I got a phone message from Mr. Lex Devlin telling me to meet him at five at Sullivan's Gym.

For the second time in my life, we walked through that door into a world that is light-years from anything else I've ever experienced. The center of the large room was consumed with the ring that held two fighters going at each other full tilt. We went over to ringside. What with the padded sparring helmets and mouth guards, the faces gave up little by way of identity, but the bodies told a story. One was young, fresh, and taut. The other was equally muscular, but something about the skin said that it was two, maybe three times the age of the other.

The younger body was amazingly quick, with a good sense of the rhythm that makes a natural fighter, but the older body showed the learning of age and experience. More often than not, the boy's punches struck air or glanced off the arms of the older man. And through it all, punctuating with grunts when he'd take a punch to the body, the older man kept up a running litany of prompts.

"Keep up that left! Move with me! You're off balance. Dig in that foot when you throw the right!"

I was mesmerized by the gracefulness of the dance in spite of the violence. Perhaps that's why the old timers call boxing "the sweet science."

Finally a bell sounded. The two bodies wrapped their arms around each other until they could catch their breath. The older man was talking low, and respect for every word was written all over the young man's face.

"Give it fifteen minutes on the light bag before you shower. And Tony, you're in by eight o'clock tonight. You hear?"

Tony nodded and the older man cuffed him a light tap on the back of the head as he jogged off.

The older man caught sight of us and came over to the side of the ring. When he took off the helmet, the shock of white hair reminded me that Father Flaherty was one week younger than Mr. Devlin.

We exchanged handshakes. He was still taking deep breaths when he asked if the two of us could join him for dinner. It was either my skipped lunch or the uncertainty of the timing of my next meal that pulled a "Yes!" out of me slightly before he fully got out the invitation. He grinned at my enthusiasm and said he'd join us after a shower.

When he left, I leaned over to Mr. Devlin.

"When he was a fighter, how good was he?"

"Boxer, son." He moved over to a seat beside the ring.

"Matt was a champ in the making. He won Golden Gloves heavyweight by the time we were twenty. He went through the early stages of a pro career without a loss."

"I think you told me once, but why did he quit?"

"Quit, is it? Matthew Flaherty?" Mr. D. was on his feet beside me. I realized too late that I'd hit the same nerve I hit two years ago when I made the mistake of asking the same question.

"The man never quit on anything or anyone in his life. There was a lowlife in the neighborhood, ran a gambling syndicate. He put pressure on Matt to take a dive in a particular fight. Matt would have none of it. He came out of his corner that night like he was swinging at the devil. Knocked his man out in the second round just to show them where he stood. When he got home, four of them were waiting for him. Those hands could never land a heavyweight punch again."

We watched two new fighters sparring in the ring in front of us for a bit before Mr. D. spoke again.

"That's when Matt found another way to fight the bad guys."

I was about to speak, when we both felt a massive arm around our shoulders. The hand on my shoulder was knobby and gnarled

with fingers that each seemed to choose its own direction. I turned and saw the rugged look of the older boxer dressed in blacks and a Roman collar.

Dinner was served by Mrs. O'Shaughnessy, the elderly Irish cook at the rectory of Saint Anthony's Church, a couple of blocks from the gym. She was no Emeril Lagasse, but that woman could do magical things to a corned beef and cabbage. The wine flowed liberally at the hand of our host, and by seven o'clock I felt fully restored to a level of contentment I hadn't remembered in weeks.

Father Flaherty had been in good spirits throughout the evening. At this point, he leaned across the table toward Mr. Devlin, with a smile of anticipation the width of his face.

"What did you think of him, Lex?"

"Of . . . ?"

"Of Tony? Tony Amato. The boy I was sparring with."

Mr. D. paused for some thought before answering.

"He's quick. He's got all the natural tools. I also saw some of the timing, some of the finesse that a certain fighter had when you and I were eighteen. I think I know where he got it."

Father Flaherty sat back with a grin even broader.

"He's ready, Matt. He's going to have his last fight at the club level this Friday night. I hope you can be there. You too, Michael. He's fighting a good boxer, Hector Gallo, but he can take him. Then I'm going to turn him pro."

"And where from there, Matt?"

Father Flaherty leaned forward.

"Someday I want you both to remember that you heard it at this table. That boy's going to be the next middleweight champion of the world."

Mr. D. smiled with him.

"That's ambitious, but I trust your eye, Matt. Where'd you find him?"

"Judge Madsen called me. There was a gang fight. Tony was the last one standing. With nothing but these."

He held up his two tree stumps of fists.

"The judge needed someone to take responsibility for him. That was three years ago. He's been living with one of the families in the parish. I've been training him since then. He wants it for all the right reasons. He's going to lift his family out of here. He can do it, Lex. I've got the feeling."

That Friday night, Mr. D. and I were sitting ringside at the Boston Arena. Father Flaherty reserved seats for us beside Tony's

corner. The arena was in the south end of Boston. It held about three hundred spectators, mostly of the male persuasion. I came to realize through the preliminaries that club boxing is every bit as much the raw blood sport as its uptown professional version, without the velvet coating.

About ten o'clock, a cheer went up when Father Flaherty in civilian clothes walked his future champion down to the ring and through the ropes. Both boxers went through the usual bouncing and shadowboxing while their managers kept their shoulder muscles limbered.

The referee's instructions were given, gloves were tapped, and the bell sent these modern gladiators into combat.

There was a lot of bobbing and weaving in the first round. Each fighter felt out the speed and style of the other. Both gave and both took the tentative first round punches. At the bell, I could see tension on the face of Father Flaherty. From where we sat, I could hear him jackhammering instructions into Tony's ear.

The bell called the boxers back to action. I could see the tension growing on Father Flaherty's face. I noticed the two boxers opening up the give and take with more ferocity, but I must have been missing whatever was deepening Father Flaherty's scowl.

When the bell brought Tony back to the corner, Father Flaherty fired jibes at him like a machine gun.

"Tony, what are you doing? You're dropping your left. You're sweeping your right. That kid's going to catch on. He's going to tag you right down the middle. You never did this. What're you doing?"

Tony just focused straight ahead and mumbled "It's okay. It's okay. I know what I'm doing."

The stunned look that brought to Father Flaherty's face never found its way into words. The bell sounded and Tony was back in the mix. The third round went worse than the second. Tony took several hard punches inside. One vicious left opened up a cut over his right eye. By the time he got back to the corner, blood covered the right side of his face. His cut-man cleaned away the blood and was about to apply an astringent, when Father Flaherty pulled him away. He turned Tony's face toward him and said from two inches away, "What's going on?"

Tony tried to turn away, but Father Flaherty held his face in front of him. "Tell me now, before it happens!"

I thought I could almost see tears forming in Tony's eyes, when he said something in a whisper. Father Flaherty straightened up and stared at something across the ring. He was looking into the beady eyes of a fat man with greasy thinning hair in the front row.

The smirk on his face turned to a grin when Father Flaherty locked eyes with him.

The one who really caught my attention was the tall figure sitting next to him. He was dressed in a dark suit with a turtleneck shirt. He sat ramrod straight. There was no expression on his face whatever, but what gave me a case of the chills were his eyes. I've seen more warmth in the eyes of a sand shark than in those two pools of cold steel. And they never left Father Flaherty.

The cut-man in Tony's corner was yelling at Father Flaherty that

He raised his right hand as if it were a pistol, took aim at the priest, and pretended to fire. he had to stop the bleeding before the next round. Father Flaherty ignored him and held Tony's face two inches from his own.

"What's the deal, Tony? All of it!"

I could just make out Tony's words.

"He told me to go down. It has to be in the sixth round or he loses. I got to make it look good till the sixth."

Father Flaherty was shouting now.

"Why, Tony? What'll they do?"

"I can't . . ."

"What, Tony? Tell me!"

"They'll kill . . ."

"Who, Tony? You? Your family? Who?"

Tears were flowing into the streaming blood on Tony's face.

"You, Father! You!"

Father Flaherty seemed struck by a bolt of lightning. He stood straight up and looked across the ring at the beady eyes that were grinning back at him. He reached around and grabbed the towel that hung around the cut-man's neck and threw it into the ring.

The fight was over. The crowd was stunned into silence. The fat man across the ring sat frozen with his mouth open. The fight had ended in the third round. The grin and the smirk were gone. It took moments before the fat man could comprehend that he had been handed defeat by the man looking back at him from the ring.

The buzz and then the roaring boos of the crowd grew to a crescendo. The fat man glared daggers of blind rage at the priest before filling the aisle with his bulk. The back of his neck was beet red as he puffed his way to the exit.

I had my eyes on the tall man with cold eyes. The eyes were locked on Father Flaherty, and when their eyes met, a passionless grin broke the tall man's features. He raised his right hand as if it were a pistol, took aim at the priest, and pretended to fire.



Saturday morning would have been a sleep-in day but for the annoying weeklong habit of waking at six o'clock. I turned on the morning news and caught the report of a shooting the previous night. Father Matthew Flaherty of Saint Anthony's Church in Charlestown had been gunned down by an unknown assailant on the steps of the rectory as he returned home. Despite being struck several times, he was alive in critical condition at Saint Elizabeth's Hospital.

I hit the numbers of Mr. Devlin's cell phone out of reflex. He had heard the same broadcast.

"I'm on my way to Saint E's, Michael. I'll see you there. One thing . . ."

"I know. Tom Burns."

"Right. Do it now."

I dialed the private number of the head of the Burns Investigative Agency. Tom was expensive, particularly for personal service. But the gap between Tom and the second best in his line of work made the price reasonable.

"Tom, this is Michael."

"What's up, Mike?"

"The priest that was shot last night in Charlestown. He's at Saint Elizabeth's. You heard about it?"

"I heard, Mike."

"His name is Father Matthew Flaherty. He and Mr. Devlin go way back. The word's out that he's still surviving. He needs tight protection from right now. Whoever did it may try to finish it. He could be well connected with the local police. We don't know. Can you get on it?"

"I'm on it, Mike. Incidentally, if you go to the hospital, you may not see my people. Doesn't mean they're not there."

"I know, Tom. Stay on it till Mr. Devlin calls it off."

I met Mr. Devlin in the waiting room outside of the intensive care unit at Saint Elizabeth's Hospital in Brighton. Mr. D. looked grim, and I was feeling the shock myself.

We just arrived when someone in green pants and shirt came through a swinging door and asked for Lex Devlin.

"He wants to see you, Mr. Devlin. It's touch and go. Keep it short."

Mr. D. waved me along without asking permission, and we stood beside the bed of a pale, struggling version of the man I had seen boxing two days earlier. He had more wires and tubes connected to him than a string puppet. His breathing was labored, but when he saw Mr. Devlin a bit of a spark lit the clouded eyes.

Mr. D. put his ear down next to Father Flaherty's mouth. It was more breath than voice, but I could just make it out.

"How's Tony? Did they get him too?"

"No, Matt. He's okay. Take it easy."

"Lex, tell Tony I had to end the fight. If he'd taken a dive the way they wanted it, they'd have him forever."

"I know, Matt."

"Tell him, Lex. Tell him he'll have his day."

Mr. Devlin leaned in closer.

"Did you see who shot you, Matt?"

Father Flaherty shook his head slowly and took a couple of deep breaths. His voice was slow and fading.

"I'm getting old, Lex. He came right up behind me before I knew he was there. He was a foot away. First thing I heard was the shot. I don't know . . ."

He dropped off into sleep or a coma, and I began to feel the loss of him already.

We were back in the waiting room when Mr. Devlin took me aside.

"I didn't have a chance to tell you, and I certainly didn't tell Matt. I got a message from Billy Coyne at the D.A.'s office. Billy goes back with me and Matt. He thought I'd want to know. They arrested Tony Amato. They're charging him with shooting Matt."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing.

"Why?"

"I don't know. That was the whole message. I'm going to stay here. Will you run over to the county jail? See what you can find out."

I was at the county lockup within half an hour. I stretched the truth about being Tony's lawyer, and they brought him into the interviewing room. I've never seen such a perfect specimen of a young human being look so totally bewildered. I waved him into a seat behind a metal table, and I sat opposite him.

"Tony, we've never met. I'm a friend of a close friend of Father Flaherty. Actually, I'm a lawyer. If you like, I can represent you."

He cut to the top of his list of concerns.

"How's Father Flaherty? Did you see him?"

"I saw him, Tony. I'll be honest. He's on the edge. The only thing he was worried about was you. He doesn't know about this."

I saw tears forming, and I hoped they weren't tears of guilt.

"What happened last night, Tony?"

He took a minute, but his answer was calm and direct. I looked for eye blinking, a good test of lying, but there was none.

"I showered after the fight. I just walked around about an hour and went home. I was scared more than anything."

"About what?"

He just looked down. I leaned over close to him.

"I know about the fix. What were you afraid of?"

"They said they'd kill Father Flaherty if I didn't go down in the sixth round. He should'a let me."

"He doesn't see it that way. Who are they?"

"I don't know."

"How did they get the message to you?"

"A man came to see me outside the gym. Skinny little guy. He's kind of bald. Has a reddish mark up here on his forehead."

"Name?"

He just shook his head.

"Did he say who sent him?"

"No."

I packed up and held my hand out to him.

"Don't talk to anyone else, Tony. I'll be in touch."

He stood and took my hand. He still looked bewildered and vulnerable. I could feel my anger level rising still higher at the lowlifes who were blindsiding this kid who was "the next middle-weight champion of the world."

I dialed Mr. Devlin's cell phone. He was still at the hospital. Father Flaherty was still hanging on. I passed on what little I learned. We agreed to meet at the office.

Twenty minutes later I was in my usual seat in front of Mr. D.'s desk, and he was on the speakerphone to the district attorney's office. The receptionist put him through directly to Deputy District Attorney Billy Coyne. They were both relics of a generation of lawyers whose most valuable asset was their word, and both bore the scars of honest mutual combat in the arena of the criminal session of the Suffolk County Superior Court. They had also shared a friendship with Matthew Flaherty since elementary school.

"How is he, Lex?"

"I've seen him better, Billy. So have you."

There were a few seconds of silence.

"It's a wonder he's alive, Lex. They got him with three shots in the back. That's not public information. The worst one pierced his left kidney and came out through his right rib cage. The bleeding would have killed anyone else."

I could see the pain in Mr. Devlin's face.

"I guess Matt can still take a punch."

"Yeah. I'm going over, this afternoon. Dear God, why Matt of all people?"

"I don't know, Billy. What's this about Tony Amato?"

"We got an anonymous phone tip early this morning. He said Tony Amato shot Matt. Said the gun he used was in the glove compartment of Amato's car. We got a search warrant. It was there. Ballistics says it was the gun that shot Matt."

"Did you know the tipper?"

"No."

"Billy, you can't get a search warrant on an anonymous tip from someone with no background."

"I know, Lex. This is Matt Flaherty we're talking about. I called in a favor. Don't give me grief on this. You'd have done it."

I always enjoyed the honesty between these two.

"Yeah, probably. I may have to challenge it later, but you're right. I'd have done it."

"Right."

"But, Billy, come on. Does this smell like a setup? Anyone could plant that gun and phone in a tip."

"I go with what I've got. You have anything better?"

"I don't know. There was a puffed-up, sleazy-looking, cigar-chewing character at the fight last night. He kept looking at Matt with a self-satisfied grin up till the fight ended. Then he stormed off like a bull out of control. Ring any bells?"

"You don't get back to the old neighborhood much, do you, Lex? Yeah, I know him. Seamus Quinn. You pegged him right. He's a would-be Godfather on the Irish side. Most of it's minor racket stuff. I've also heard rumors that he's a collector of donations from the big Irish supporters around here for the IRA, the part that likes to play with bombs. I don't know about that. That's for the Feds to worry about."

Mr. D. described the tall, cold-looking individual sitting beside Quinn at the fight, but Billy had no clue.

I jotted a quick note to Mr. D., and he asked Billy about a skinny little guy with a red patch on his forehead, the one who carried the message about fixing the fight to Tony. Billy said he was a little weasel who ran Quinn's errands for him. His name was Fin Feeney. He mostly hung around the Shamrock Bar in Charlestown. Quinn had his office in the back room of the bar.

Mr. D. turned around to look out the window at Boston Harbor. I recognized his fighting position.

"Billy, about Amato. If you've got the wrong man, the right one could make another try at Matt. What motive could Amato have?"

"Are you kidding, Lex? This fight could have put him in the

major league. Matt said so. All of a sudden there's a little blood, and his manager ends the fight. He sees the end of his career. You think he's not mad enough to go after his manager?"

"Billy, for the love of Pete, Tony Amato was going to take a dive in the sixth round. He was throwing it away himself. Matt just changed the timing."

"Good old Lex. A dive, was it? I think you pulled that one right out of your ear."

"Billy, it's true. He knuckled under when they threatened to kill Matt. Matt didn't know about the fix himself till the fight was on. That's why he stopped it before the sixth round."

"Uh-huh. Says who?"

"Says Tony. Says Matt, as soon as you can see him."

"Very convincing, Lex. Tony says it to save his skin, and you know Matt. He'll say anything to save his boy."

"If he'd shot him?"

"Matt's in the forgiving business."

"Let's face it, Billy. If I can prove the fix, what have you got? The gun was a plant. Didn't even have Tony's fingerprints on it."

There was a silent moment.

"If you can prove the fix, Lex. I'll personally walk Amato out of jail."

When he hung up, I asked Mr. D., "How did you know Tony's prints weren't on the gun?"

"If the gun was just planted last night, Tony'd never have touched it. In other words, I was taking a stab in the dark. I notice Billy didn't correct me."

I figured our immediate needs were twofold. One was proof that the fix was on before Father Flaherty stopped the fight. The second was to neutralize whoever might want to finish what he started with Father Flaherty—assuming nature didn't do it for him.

By two o'clock I was back in Charlestown. The Shamrock Bar catered to a clientele that ranged from blue collar to no collar—mostly the latter. In a two-piece Hart Schaffner Marx suit, I did not exactly blend, but it served the bluff.

I checked the patronage at the bar for the closest resemblance to a weasel. He was sitting alone at the far end of the bar, squinty eyes and all. I could see in the mirror over the bar that he had a red birthmark on his forehead.

I got the bartender's attention and asked if Seamus Quinn was in his office. I needed a clear deck to operate on the weasel, Fin Feeney.

The bartender straightened up and scanned me from my cuffless pants to the Armani tie.

"Who wants to know?"

I gave him an instant flash of my membership card in the Boston Athletic Club and said, "Internal Revenue Service."

I figured that would get a straight answer.

"Mr. Quinn ain't here. Should be back inside half an hour."

"I'll wait."

I walked down to the end of the bar and slid up on a stool next to the aforementioned Fin Feeney.

Outside of a couple of sneaky glances, he pretended to ignore me until I said, "You and I have business, Mr. Feeney."

He jumped a little before squinting sideways at me.

"Who the hell are you?"

"In your case, Fin, I could be the difference between life and death."

He was stuck for an answer so I played on.

"Mr. Quinn asked me to represent you. You're about to be indicted as an accessory to aggravated assault on a priest, perhaps even murder."

I was moving a bit fast for his comprehension, but I liked it that way.

"You set up the fix on the Amato fight. Tony Amato can identify you."

He was stiff as a board and squinting at me eye to eye.

"Wait a minute. Mr. Quinn knows I was just a messenger."

"That's what an accessory is, Fin. Then you called in 'an anonymous tip to the police about a gun in Amato's car." That was a guess, but I figured Quinn used his gofer for any related odd jobs.

"They can't prove nothin'."

"Fin, have you ever heard of voice prints? They arrest you, take a voice sampler, and compare it to the recording they keep of the so-called anonymous tip you phoned in. They've got you."

His mind was racing to catch up, but the look on his face told me I had a weasel in the trap.

"Tell me about the fix, Fin."

"I got to talk to Mr. Quinn."

"He's not here. In the next five minutes I'll decide whether I'll take you on as a client. If I do and get back to the D.A. before you're indicted, you may not spend the rest of your life in prison. Tell me about the fix."

He turned back to the bar and took another slug of the beer sitting in front of him. I thought I'd lost him until he turned back and leaned over close enough to whisper.

"Mr. Quinn give me directions. He said to see Tony Amato when he comes out of the gym. Tell him he takes a dive in the sixth round or his manager . . . you know."

"His manager what, Fin?"

"He gets it. You know . . ."

"He dies?"

"Yeah."

I felt the miniature recorder in my pocket to be sure it had been running. I still didn't know who pulled the trigger on Father Flaherty. I seriously doubted that Quinn would trust Feeney with anything that serious. I couldn't get out of my mind the vision of the tall man with Quinn sighting Father Flaherty with a pretend gun.

"Who was the man with Quinn at the fight? Tall, about six four, well built, cold eyes."

"Ah, that one. He got in from Dublin the day of the fight. He's a cold one, and that's right. I've only heard him called 'Stone.'"

"Does he work for Quinn?"

"No. He's his own man. He has business with Mr. Quinn."

"Have you seen him before?"

"No. It's a different one end of every month. They come in for a couple of days and fly back to Ireland."

"How do I find Stone?"

"Who knows? I heard once he eats sometimes at Molly McGuire's up on Pearl Street."

I stood up to leave, and Fin caught me by the sleeve.

"Are you takin' my case?"

"I don't know, Fin. I haven't decided. Sit tight."

On my way out, I made my way past two men coming in. One was the size of a side of beef and fit the bodyguard mold. The other was Seamus Quinn.

I flashed him a grin, and he returned it until I raised my finger like a gun, aimed between his eyes, and pretended to pull the trigger. I was gone while the grin was still leaving his face.

On the way back to Boston, I stopped at Molly McGuire's Restaurant. I left a message with the manager for the man called Stone. He didn't say he knew him, but he didn't deny it. I said, "Tell him we have business. I'll be in tomorrow at noon."

I left my card. It felt nicely uncomplicated to be playing myself for a change.

Mr. Devlin was in his office when I arrived with the recording of my chat with Fin Feeney about the fixed fight. Mr. Devlin played it over the phone to Billy Coyne. Billy listened and knew

that if it came from Lex Devlin it was genuine.

"I'll keep my promise, Lex. I'll have the indictment dismissed. I'll even walk Amato out of jail."

"Not yet, Billy. Could you hold him in protective custody for a few more days? Just let him know he's off the hook for the shooting."

We still had to neutralize the threat to Father Flaherty. It was noon the next day when I walked into Molly Maguire's Restaurant. I caught the eye of the manager and just waited. He nodded toward a room in the back with three tables. I sat down at a table. The only other person there was sitting behind the *Boston Globe*. When he lowered the paper, a chill ran the length of my spine. Stone looked at me with eyes that must have drained the blood out of my face.

"You said we have business. And what might that be?"

There was a quietness in the voice that said he was, as always, in control of the situation.

"I have an offer for you, Mr. Stone."

"Stone'll do. And what do you have that I might want?"

"Anything. I'm a friend of Father Flaherty. I think you shot him two nights ago."

There wasn't a flicker.

"What I want, Mr. Stone, is an end to it. I want to call you off. And I'll pay whatever it takes."

There was silence. His eyes never left mine, but something between a smile and a grin came across his lips.

"You've got guts, Mr. . . ."

"Knight."

"I think your stomach's doing handstands, but you're cool enough to pull it off. I respect that."

"I need more than your respect."

He leaned back in his chair.

"You're wrong, Mr. Knight. Your priest is no concern to me."

"I wish I could believe that."

"I wouldn't question my word if I were you, Mr. Knight. I had no part in the shooting."

I had no words.

"You want proof, Mr. Knight. I'll give you all you're going to get. First, I wouldn't shoot a priest. I'm enough of an Irish Catholic to draw the line. Second . . ."

He stood up.

"And you better take this to heart. If I had done it, your priest would be dead."

He started toward the door.

"Our business is finished, Mr. Knight."

As he reached the door, I made one last move.

"I don't suppose you'd tell me what business you have with Seamus Quinn?"

He looked at me with those fish eyes. The smile was gone.

"You'll live a lot longer if you don't ask."

For once in my life, I chose discretion. I didn't ask. But I couldn't help wondering how close to home Billy Coyne's rumor was about Quinn's being a collection point for donations to the IRA.

That triggered another chain of thought. I paid another call on Fin Feeney after calling to be sure Quinn was out of the office. I asked Fin if Quinn had had him fix fights before. He admitted to four previous fixes at the same fight club.

"When exactly?"

"He had me set up a fix at the end of the month the last five months."

"Did the fixes come off?"

"Clean as could be. Those bums know enough not to mess with Mr. Quinn."

Quinn was back in his office at the Shamrock Bar at five o'clock that night. I was there at five minutes past five for what I called private business. I must have looked harmless because he sent the side-of-beef bodyguard out to the bar. I closed the door and introduced myself with all the deference I could stomach.

My first move in establishing our new friendship was to hand him a cigar. He recognized it as expensive, and it was. I considered it an investment. He put it in his teeth, and I flipped him my best lighter, which he caught like a shortstop.

"You're pretty good for a lefty, Mr. Quinn."

"Ah, I could've played pro ball. That was a few years and a couple'a pounds ago. So what do you want, Knight?"

"You heard about Father Flaherty."

"Yeah, too bad."

"You're a man who knows things. Any idea who did it?"

He took a long puff on the cigar.

"Naw. That's too bad he couldn't identify the shooter. We may never know."

I gave him my best enigmatic smile.

"We'll see. I've got a lead. I'll know by eight o'clock tonight. I may need you to confirm some information."

I had his full attention. He was massaging the cigar between his lips and fingers.

"Who you talkin' about?"

"Irishman. They call him Stone."

He was working the cigar over pretty good now. If I was right, he saw a chance to solve two immediate problems. There was a definite glint in his eye.

"What makes you think so?"

"I think he lost a lot of money on the fight. I don't think he took it well."

He was trying to suppress a grin.

"Yeah, that's right. He seemed real upset that night. Said something about getting even with the kid's manager."

"I think we're thinking the same way, Mr. Quinn. I'll be back at quarter of eight tonight. Will you be here?"

"Sure. Anything to help Father Flaherty."

I had an idea where this thing could be going with the right pressure here and there. I went back to the office and laid out the plan, such as it was, to Mr. Devlin. He made the usual objections to my putting my neck on a chopping block, but on assurances that I'd take the cowardly approach at every opportunity, he agreed to play.

Most importantly, Mr. D. explained what we needed to Billy Coyne. After dangling a prize plum in front of his nose, Mr. D. got Billy on board. The game was on.

My next move was to leave a note with the manager of Molly Maguire's Restaurant for Stone. It was cryptic.

"Be at the Shamrock Bar tonight at eight. I'll have the package ready for you."

I signed it, "Seamus Quinn."

At ten minutes of eight, I walked into Quinn's office and closed the door. This time, the gloves were off.

"I've got a deal for you, Quinn. It's a one-time offer."

He gave me a what-have-we-here look. "An offer of what?"

"Your life. The fact is, you shot Father Flaherty."

"The h—"

"Let's not waste each other's time, Quinn. He was shot by a left-handed gunman from directly behind. The track of one of the bullets went from his left kidney to his right rib. You're the only lefty in the picture."

"That don't . . ."

"You also knew he couldn't identify the shooter. It was never made public that he was shot in the back. Time's running out. You've got three minutes to choose between life and death."

"What're you talkin' about?"

"You've got two doors in this place. One of them's right behind you out to the back alley. Assistant District Attorney Coyne and some FBI agents are out there ready to take you into protective custody. So far, you're facing aggravated assault and battery and attempted murder. You'll do time, but it'll be a lot less and under safer conditions if you give the right information. Time's getting short. If it becomes murder, the deal's off."

He hunkered back behind the cigar and forced a grin.

"Just curiosity. What do they want from me?"

"They want the names of all of the people around here who've been financing the terrorists in the Irish Republican Army. Those are the people you collect money from every month to hand over to couriers like Stone. Those names are your stock-in-trade with the district attorney."

The grin got wider. I knew it would take more than a bluff to stampede him into the arms of the FBI. He stood up and looked me square in the eye.

"You got nothin', ya bum. Get out of my office."

It was time to play my last ace.

"Then there's this other door, Quinn."

I opened the door that led into the bar. The timing could not have been better. It was eight o'clock sharp. Stone had just come into the bar. He'd stopped for a shot of Jameson on the way back to Quinn's office.

"There's your alternative, Quinn. Stone's here to collect the IRA money. But you don't have it, do you? Funny coincidence. For the past five months you've fixed a fight just at the time you had the month's collection for the IRA ready to be picked up by a man from Ireland. My guess is you used the money to bet on a fight you fixed, take the profits, and still have the collection ready for the pick-up man. This time it backfired. You lost the money on Tony Amato's fight."

The grin was gone. I could see him make eye contact with Stone at the bar.

"I don't know, Quinn. Maybe Stone's the soft, understanding type. Maybe he'll overlook the games you've been playing with IRA money."

Gleaming sweat was now beading on his long forehead.

"Those are the choices, Quinn. You live as a witness by walking through that back door, or . . ."

I looked over my shoulder at Stone and gave a shudder for effect.

Quinn was breathing double time when I turned and walked

into the bar. I stood beside Stone long enough to sketch out the game Quinn had been playing each month in betting the IRA collection on a fixed fight and keeping the profits. The punchline was that this time he'd lost the money on the Amato fight that Stone was to take back to Ireland. The look in those cold fish eyes told me that Stone might not be soft or understanding.

I think Quinn read the same message in Stone's eyes as he walked back toward Quinn's office. I saw one look of abject terror spread across Quinn's face before he grabbed the handle of the back door behind him. Beyond Stone's massive torso, I could just see Quinn's fat but agile body burst through the back door. He practically jumped into the hands of the waiting Billy Coyne.

I got over to Saint Elizabeth's Hospital the next morning about ten. The good news was that Father Flaherty had graduated from intensive care to a private room. With the shooter, Quinn, neutralized, there was no more need to keep him under the watchful eye of Tom Burns.

Billy Coyne had been true to his word about Tony Amato. When I came in, I saw Tony standing beside the bed. Mr. Devlin and Billy Coyne had been there since eight o'clock. They were about to leave. I just wanted to stay long enough to see Father Flaherty looking more like the boxer I saw in the ring.

Father Flaherty waved me over to the bed and took hold of my hand. His voice was not up to fighting strength, but it sounded good to me.

"I understand you went the distance for me, son. How do I ever pay you back?"

"Ah, my rates are steep, Father. I'll take nothing less than another of Mrs. O'Shaughnessy's corned beef and cabbage dinners."

He laughed and it was good to see it.

"You'll have it, son. And many more I hope."

A nurse came in to remind us that the man in the bed had been shot three days ago. The hint was taken. Billy and Mr. D. and I took our leave.

Father Flaherty asked Tony to stay a bit. The Irish tint was coming back in his cheeks. I could sense a return of the old intensity as we left them discussing the rematch a month from Friday between Hector Gallo and Tony Amato, the next middleweight champion of the world. ♣

FALSE KEYS

R. T. LAWTON

“Fool,” cried Mother Margaux. The sound of her voice was soon followed by the resounding smack of flesh on flesh.

Pressing one hand to my sore ear, I walked slowly back into the darkness at the rear of the line to try once more for my supper. In the beginning, it had been easy to believe the ringing pain in my head derived from the clumsiness of my own fingers, as our teacher so often claimed. But lately I much preferred to lay blame directly upon the mercurial temper of Mother Margaux herself. She had grown more prone to sudden acts of violence since the imprisonment of the Bookkeeper a fortnight ago, when he fell afoul of Louis XIV’s provost.

Of course, her flare-ups weren’t the only ones. Tempers had also sparked among other adults in our little community these last several days. Frustration, it seemed, was not an easy mistress to embrace for long.

With a self curse for the low rumble in my belly and a lesser one for the erring way of my hands, I vowed to do better on the next attempt. I stepped forward as the line moved, and that’s when I first noticed the stranger watching us from the opposite edge of the firelight. He stood motionless, wrapped in a dark cloak with a hood to shadow his face, while the lower half of the heavy cloth outlined the length of a sword at his hip. But even with his hidden face and dangerous weapon, I knew he didn’t belong up here on the Buttes-Chaumont, where the hierarchy of the Parisian underworld held nightly court in an abandoned villa.

Our hill, half hollowed out by underground stone quarries dating back to the time of the Romans, had long served as the refuse dump of generations—a dumping ground for both garbage and human castaways. Nothing in these fallen ruins on our hill should have been of interest to this stranger. And yet, the man seemed to be intently studying each of us young ragamuffins in Mother Margaux’s training school as if he might have a future use for someone with our sleight-of-hand talents.

“Get up here,” rasped the old woman’s voice to the next in line.

One student at a time, we approached a wobbly three-legged stool set next to a straw-stuffed dummy hanging from an archway in the villa. Close beside this life-sized scarecrow hovered the dirt-streaked face of our grayhaired teacher as she barked instructions and harsh encouragement to the next student who tried his luck. Reward for those who managed to silently relieve the suspended scarecrow of its leather purse, while balancing precariously on the lopsided stool, was a crust of bread for supper.

But Mother Margaux did not easily suffer failure from her children, as she called us. For those students who rang even one of the small bells sewn onto the clothes of that hated dummy, Mother Margaux quickly dealt a ringing buffet to the side of the culprit's head. And thereafter, the stomach of that student remained empty until his fingers learned to become light and stealthy. My third attempt tonight was successful. Now at least I had a piece of hard bread to help me forget my aching ears.

Food in hand, I looked for the stranger again, but he had moved on. Only the receding outline of his hooded cloak against the light of a nearby campfire told me the direction of his travel. Out of curiosity, I followed close enough to track his progress. This stranger wore the rich clothes of nobility, and for us to have any nobleman appear in our court of outcasts was an unheard-of rarity.

Seemingly unbothered by the flow of dark humanity moving back and forth, my nobleman threaded his way through the mass of thieves, robbers, beggars, and trollops. He walked sure of foot across the broken ground, even though the only light to silhouette larger stones and the low garden walls came from a number of small campfires scattered about in the fallen rubble. The path he chose took him to the edge of the main bonfire in our encampment. Here he stopped in a small open space on the fringe of the crowd.

On the far side of these high yellow flames sat our very own Jules, a lean man with a hungry face. Master of all upon our hill, Jules sat lightly in a padded, high-backed chair of a more elegant era, except now the ragged, white-stuffing insides protruded through long tears in the rich upholstery. Flanking both sides of his chair stood a bodyguard of assassins, rough and hard faced. Surely, the noble stranger I followed had no idea of the world into which he had descended.

I stealthily moved up to within a mere arm's length beside the nobleman, my intended target, and there we stood for several minutes. At this range, I more closely observed his face as he glanced at his surroundings. His complexion was smooth, and he had a long, waxed mustache beneath a prominent Gallic nose. But it was his dark, almost black, flashing eyes that drew my attention.

He appeared to be observing something of great interest on Jules's side of the fire.

In the meantime, I wondered how I might put my newfound skills to good use. If only my victim's cloak weren't in the way of his pockets and purse.

Eventually, he made to move off, but a slender hand reached out in front of me and tugged on his elbow.

"What do you wish here?" inquired a soft female voice.

I had been so intent on the stranger that I failed to notice Josette, Mother Margaux's sometime assistant, standing in the crowd. This young woman was one of Mother's best graduates and would surely relieve my nobleman of his purse long before I made my play. The most I could hope for now was to watch her work and possibly learn some of the finer subtleties of our craft.

My target turned to look at the source of the female voice, and I'm sure he saw Josette as I did. In the flickering firelight, Josette's face was clean and as yet unlined with the wear of daily living. Her countenance gleamed fair and pleasing, her long black hair hanging loose around her face and shoulders.

The nobleman cocked his head slightly.

"I beg your pardon."

"I asked what it is you wished to find here," she repeated.

He smiled and made a short bow.

"Acceptance," was his reply.

She appeared to study him for a moment before speaking again.

"Wait until the king has finished his yearly proclamation."

"King? What does our self-declared Sun King have to do with this mob?"

"Not the king of France, monsieur." She pointed at the chair facing the other side of the flames. "I speak of Jules, who has crowned himself king of the Paris underworld. Wait until he has spoken; perhaps then you will learn how to find the acceptance you seek."

"And what will your King Jules have to say that will be of interest to me?"

"Tonight is the night for tithing."

"Tithing? Have I come to a church by mistake?"

"No monsieur." She grinned back at him. "But all who bide here pay one-tenth of their earnings to Jules. It is his law. And for that, you receive his blessing."

The stranger grunted. "I've been blessed by the pope himself for less than that."

"The fine clothes on your back, monsieur, say that you are not one of us. Yet all who live here must pay, else be thrown out of this sanctuary you have entered so boldly without invite."

"And if I choose to neither leave nor pay?"

"Those who oppose the king are usually found out on the hill the following morning, murdered by persons unknown. However, you would not have to look very far to find the killers."

She cast her gaze to the other side of the fire.

"I see," said my nobleman. "And whom do I have to thank for these words of caution?"

For a moment, she hesitated, as if unsure.

"Ah, you mean me. My name is Josette."

"And I am the Chevalier . . ." He cut off the rest of his sentence and started anew. "Perhaps you should just call me Remy. I've recently been in search of a new name, and Remy is as good as any."

She gave a mock curtsy and stepped closer, shivering slightly as if from a chill in the evening air.

In response, Remy extended his right arm and cloak like a large raptor of the night spreading one wing. With this gesture, he offered the warmth of his outer garment, if she cared to join him. After only a moment's hesitation, Mother Margaux's star graduate moved in under his opened cloak. But in doing so, her left knee must have bumped against his right leg because he quickly took a half step sideways to retain his balance. She apologized for her clumsiness.

I recognized her simple ruse of distraction, but then both of us soon found the Chevalier was no fool to be so easily fleeced. At the time of the bump, he had evidently also felt the light brush of her hand reaching for his money. He grabbed Josette's slender wrist. She grimaced, but made no outcry.

"Unfortunately for both of us," he said, "my purse is empty. Not a single sou remains in my possession, not even a copper denier. It is these low circumstances that bring me into your kingdom of thieves and scoundrels."

Josette broke free of the enveloping cloak, yet the Chevalier maintained his hold on her. His grip moved down until her right hand was tightly clasped in his. She fought, but he was much the stronger. I sensed her surrender to his will was soon to come and was therefore glad I had not tested my own luck at his nonexistent money. Eventually, Josette ceased to struggle. I waited to see what she would try next.

"Monsieur Remy," she spoke in cold words, "if you continue to hold my hand, people will assume we're lovers. Please turn me loose."

"Let the people think what they will, *ma chérie*. As long as I know where your hands are, then the few personal belongings I

still have will remain much safer. Now be still. Your king has risen from his throne, and it appears he has a few words for his subjects."

On the other side of the fire, King Jules, in his patchwork cape of many colors, stood with arms outstretched to the multitude.

"Fellow criminals, tonight is the night of renewing your tithes, and as your benevolent ruler I am prepared to accept your pledges so freely given."

A man near me spat on the ground, then whispered to the night air, "Freely given, else die."

"But let me remind you," continued King Jules, "since the provost and soldiers have raided our old Court of Miracles, it is no longer safe for any of you to rest your head overnight in the city, lest the gibbet provide you with a loftier view of those citizens we have stolen from in the past. This hill where we now reside is your only sanctuary, and this refuge is provided solely to those who are generous with their money and goods. Tithe to me and I give you protection. Who will speak first?"

From the edge of the crowd, a cripple approached the foot of the worn, padded chair. He propelled himself by means of swinging his lower body, encased in a metal bowl, forward between his down-stretched arms while his gloved knuckles hopped across the ground. The bottom of the bowl oft bumped on stone. As the crowd murmured, he halted before the king. With a quick movement, the cripple lifted himself out of the bowl and stood, elongating his legs to full height, shaking out the stiffness of muscle. A flourish of hand; and he tucked the metal bowl under his left arm.

"We beggars pledge our usual tithe."

"All of you are in agreement?" inquired the king.

"We are."

"So be it." The king indicated the tall pockmarked man standing at his immediate right. "At the end of each day, give one-tenth of your received coin to Loup and tell him if any beggar refuses to pay."

The beggar nodded and moved back into the crowd.

Jules made a sweep with his arm.

"Who speaks next?"

From the shadows stepped a swarthy man in clothes the color of coal. If it hadn't been for the whites of his eyes, he'd have completely disappeared into the background of a moonless night.

"Yes, Pascal," inquired King Jules.

"We of the thieves have met and also agree to tithe one-tenth of our purloined goods . . ."

"Business as usual then," replied Jules. "Bring me your loot at the

end of each job. I will have it transported to our buyers, and we will divide the wealth accordingly."

"... but," continued the swarthy man, "there are those among our guild who believe we now pay more than the tithe requires. When the Bookkeeper was here"

Jules held up a warning hand.

"The Bookkeeper, as you know well enough, was caught passing counterfeit coins in the city."

A somber look settled on Jules's face as he spoke further.

"And since my skills at math and record-keeping are rather incomplete, his arrest is a great loss to us all. Plus, now we hear the unfortunate news that his judges hint at bringing back the old penalty of kettling. It looks like a bad end for our friend, being boiled alive."

Jules visibly attempted a brave front.

"However, I may have a plan for the Bookkeeper's release. Give me some time."

Pascal ducked his head and continued from the point where he had been interrupted.

"Others suggest that you also cheat us when our share of the spoils is sold in the city."

"Then by all means, you thieves should sell your own goods."

"That is no longer possible."

"Why not?"

The swarthy man raised his head and appeared to choose his next words carefully.

"Our usual fences in all three parts of Paris—the city, the town, and the university—say that upon pain of death they can no longer purchase our stolen goods. They are able to buy from only one person and that person is you."

King Jules rubbed the knuckles of his left hand across his stubbled chin. His face assumed a contemplative look.

"I see your problem. Well, Pascal, give me the names of those malcontents in your group who believe they are being cheated, and I will have Loup question them personally about their unhappiness."

The swarthy man waved his hands weakly in the air.

"It was only some voices muttering in the dark, Jules. I didn't see who they were."

"Listen closer next time, Pascal, and we won't have this problem in the future."

As Pascal shuffled away and another speaker took his place, Josette turned to Remy. I stayed close enough to hear her words.

"You see how our king operates, one way or the other, it's the

lion's share for him and his court, leaving only the bones for us. You may wish to rethink your entrance here tonight before you have your own dealings with Loup, our king's so-called minister of justice."

"Loup does have a face to scare crows in the field and small children in the dark," replied Remy.

"Pray you don't find his visage up close to yours some desperate night," exclaimed Josette.

"In that case it wouldn't be prayers I'd use for protection. Of more interest to me, however, are the ten hard men I count at your king's side. How many others does he have?"

"Several more mingle in the crowd to keep watch and listen to the murmurings of the people. It may already be too late for you to leave. Strangers are not easily welcomed here. Each must have a special trade to earn his keep."

I knew Josette was right; Jules seemed to have an eye and an ear on all that happened not only on this hill but in all of Paris. Uneasily, I glanced behind me and recognized six large men shouldering through the crowd in our direction. If I remained where I stood, I would be trampled underfoot. And for what? I could easily step to one side and let events take their own course. But Josette had always been kind to me, and even then I knew I loved her, regardless of the years that stood between us. As for the Chevalier, I still considered him as mine to take or give away. I'd seen him long before these six ruffians.

Lightly, I touched Josette on the arm and gave warning.

"Jules has men coming this way."

She glanced over her shoulder, while the Chevalier calmly cast his gaze down on me.

"You're the boy in the school for pickpockets. Do your ears still ring?"

Surprised that he remembered me, I only nodded.

"What do you think I should do about the men coming up behind us?" he asked of me, as if I were someone worthy of giving an opinion on such circumstances.

I shrugged. Had it been me, I would have darted for the nearest hole to escape through.

He grinned.

"Remember always, when one door in life is closed to you, it becomes necessary to find another."

I had no idea what the Chevalier Remy meant. We had no doors left standing in these ruins, and he was fairly trapped within the walls of the villa. Only a rabbit, or a small boy, could squeeze through any openings to the outside world. Still, when he began

to push his way around the bonfire's edge, pulling Josette in his wake, I followed at their heels.

As we neared the throne, the last speaker had fallen silent. Now Jules raised his voice once more.

"Are there others who wish to speak on this night of tithing?"

Slowing his pace, the Chevalier released his hold on Josette's hand and stepped out of the crowd. He threw back the hood on his cloak and made a sweeping bow toward the throne. As his head came up, he opened his mouth to speak, but the king beat him to it.

"Ah, you've come at last."

Remy paused for several heartbeats.

I pushed my way to the front of the mob in order to see and hear all. The six ruffians moved up behind us.

"You know me?" inquired Remy after a moment.

"I do," replied Jules, "but your name here is not important, Chevalier. It is your special talents I have need of."

Remy stood stonefaced.

The king sat back on his chair.

I waited impatiently for Jules's next words.

"Your recent past is no great secret to me, Chevalier. Your father's noble friends at court had convinced him to invest his entire family fortune in one of the many building projects so lately favored by our *Roi Soleil*."

With the look of the fox about him, Jules continued.

"As your father soon learned, our young Sun King is quite lavish with the money of others. But of course, bankruptcy is very hard on a noble name. It leaves you with no wealth, no status. At this point, your courtly friends quickly abandoned your family. A sad commentary on life, is it not?"

"As you said before, this is no great secret."

"Yes. Well, the revenge you take is what I find to be of interest."

"Revenge?"

"You're among fellow thieves, Chevalier. Here you may accept credit for your deeds. I find it enterprising that on evenings when your former friends were out socializing, you let yourself into their homes and relieved them from the burden of their wealth. After all, who would better know the inside of a noble's house than a man who had been there on many occasions?"

"I see," said Remy, "and these are talents of which you have need?"

"I do."

Josette leaned close to whisper in the Chevalier's ear.

"How did you get into their houses?"

Remy ignored her.

"I suppose," inquired Remy of the king, "you are the reason my old buyers will no longer purchase, shall we say, personal items of value recently come to my possession?"

Jules stood and motioned with his hand.

"Come sup at my table, Chevalier, and we shall discuss your future."

"Somehow," whispered Josette, "I don't see you walking the streets of Paris with ladder in hand to enter a second-story window."

Remy stepped forward, past the now empty throne and on toward the long table behind it.

Josette and I made to follow but were stopped by two of Jules's men. All we could do was wait and watch from a distance. For an hour we observed as the Chevalier and King Jules dined on roast of beef and other delicacies that I could only guess at, but the tantalizing aroma of food made my stomach unhappy to have been served only hard bread this night. When the table was cleared, the men drank wine poured from dusty glass bottles and talked for another hour. We could hear none of the conversation, except for a stray word or two. Not enough to piece together what one man wanted from the other. At last, Remy left the table and came our way.

Josette spoke first. "What did he talk you into?"

"Jules will allow me a free hand to sell the goods I steal, if I first break the Bookkeeper out of prison."

She shook her head. "Impossible."

"Perhaps, but in any case, I'll need your help . . ."

"Me?"

" . . . and that of the young pickpocket with the sore ears. King Jules has decided that I cannot leave these ruins until the job is completed. So, I need helpers and a place to stay."

Remy strode away from the bonfire.

I ignored the reference to my clumsy hands. Instead, my ego puffed up that I was to be a part of this mad scheme to free the Bookkeeper. Yet what could I possibly do? I was no hand with a sword and had never fired a pistol in my life. If Jules and the Chevalier were relying on me to help storm the prison, they had made a poor choice. I informed Remy of these thoughts, but he made no reply as the three of us made our way to the little room that Josette called home. Long ago she had rigged a scrap of canvas over the three remaining walls of what must've once been a small storeroom in an outbuilding. At least the structure kept out the rain and some of the wind.

We were almost to her room when I heard footsteps behind us

and turned. Loup and three others of Jules's men followed us at a short distance. I cleared my throat.

"They are to ensure I don't try to leave before the job is done," Remy said without looking back.

"At least you know where they are," was the only consolation I had to offer for my nobleman's predicament. He let that statement ride in the air between us.

Two more steps, then Remy and I entered the space enclosed by the three walls. Josette hurried to build a small fire at the open end of the structure. Many were the previous nights I had dozed off in some half-protected recess in the rubble while gazing at the entrance into Josette's room, but this was the first I had been within these walls in any manner except for the dreams running through my mind. And now it seemed I was to share her with another man.

"Tell me about the Bookkeeper," said Remy as he sat on a large rock and gazed into the flames.

"He came to us two years ago," replied Josette. "A learned man in mathematics and science, he also dabbled in alchemy, which never seemed to work. Jules heard of his skill with numbers and engaged him to record our tithe payments. It soon became his job to figure out proper shares on stolen merchandise after the goods were fenced. We've always had to pay Jules, but at least with the Bookkeeper's records we got a straight deal. Not at all the way Jules cheats us now."

"Where does Jules keep these records?"

"On the table where you ate tonight, did you not see a thin red book a little smaller than your dinner plate? It rested near the king's left hand."

Remy's face quickened with interest. "Why doesn't Jules use the book himself?"

"He cannot read. He needs the Bookkeeper to decipher the notations inside. In the meantime, there are arguments and unrest between our underworld king and those who say he cheats us. If the situation isn't settled soon, Jules will have a revolution on his hands."

"And I'm to save his hide."

"How will you free the Bookkeeper?" asked Josette.

"With false keys," replied Remy, "the same way I entered the homes of my family's once friends."

This conversation promised to become interesting. I had heard of false keys, but had never known anyone who used them. I carried up a flat rock for my seat between Remy and Josette.

The two of them conversed into the night. Remy questioned

Josette about the Bookkeeper, then on Jules and his men, and finally about any details concerning the prison. Twice she left the fire and brought back a thief or other criminal who had spent time in the prison and therefore knew its inner workings. I soon grew weary and fell asleep in the middle of the room.

In the morning, I felt a rough shake on my shoulder and awoke to find Josette on my left and Remy on my right.

"Get up," said Remy, "I have an errand for you."

I rubbed my eyes and sat.

"You and Josette are going to visit the Bookkeeper this morning. Josette will play the part of his daughter deeply concerned about his welfare, and you will be his grandson. Jules has already provided us with a basket of bread and cheese and sausages, plus two bottles of wine for the guards."

"I'm going to prison?"

"Only for a short time," replied Remy as he pushed a small flat square of candle wax into my hand. "Wrap this in a cloth and conceal it on your person. Then while you're in the prison, gently press this against the lock to the cell door. The impression will tell me the size of the key I need. No one will suspect a young lad like yourself of any mischief, but don't let anyone see you do it. And be sure the wax impression doesn't become distorted on your way home."

I nodded my understanding.

Josette took my hand and we commenced our walk into the city. That morning was one of the most enjoyable of my life. The sun's rays were softer and the birds sang sweeter than any other day I'd known. With her at my side, I could've walked on air.

And then we entered the prison. The next hour became a blur, and I know now that if it hadn't been for the warmth of Josette's hand holding mine, I'd have panicked more than I did. With my wildly moving eyes and nonresponses to their questions, the guards must've believed the Bookkeeper had sired a deaf and mute grandson. It was a part I ended up playing well and without prior practice.

The return trip to the Buttes-Chaumont was not near as pleasant as the walk to the city. I breathed shallowly as if I'd just blundered out onto a steep precipice, teetered on the crumbling edge, and barely managed to step safely back before vertigo pulled me into the abyss. Prison was no place for me.

In the villa, we found Remy waiting patiently for us as if he hadn't a care for the future, even though I saw Loup skulking in the background. When asked, I handed over the cloth-wrapped square of candle wax to Remy. The Chevalier examined the wax impression and seemed satisfied.

He quickly gave me directions to the ironmonger's shop in the city and instructed me as to what I should say and do when I got there. The cloth-wrapped wax was pushed back into my hands.

"This errand will require money," I said.

Remy looked at Josette. She turned her back and I heard the rustle of cloth and the clink of coin. When she turned around again, she held out her hand. Remy selected a few coins and placed them in my free hand. "Hurry," was his last instruction.

For the second time that day, I found myself on the road to Paris. Inside the city, I followed Remy's directions along the winding streets, across the bridge, and through the canyons of houses where each succeeding story was built slightly out over its lower occupant. Eaves of the taller houses almost blotted out the sun trying to shine down on the cobblestones and muddy thoroughfares.

At the ironmonger's shop, I found my man and said my piece. He examined the wax impression and merely grunted. Wax in hand, he inspected several key blanks scattered on his workbench, chose one of the blanks, then took it over to the forge. I sat on a log and watched him work. In short time, he lay down his hammer, cooled the metal in a bucket of water, and brought the key to me. He held out his empty palm. I gave up the few coins Remy had received from Josette. In turn, the ironmonger handed me the still warm and uncut key.

"Tell the Chevalier this will fit the ward lock he has in mind." Then the ironmonger returned the cloth-wrapped square of wax to my free hand. "Here, I think you'll have further need of this. Now be gone before the watch closes the gates and stretches chains across the street, then none may pass."

I walked slowly out of the yard as if the gate watch was of no concern to someone like me. When I was sure I had passed beyond sight of the ironmonger, I took to my heels. Soon crossing the bridge over the Seine, I noticed my shadow had now grown longer than I was tall. By the time I started up our hill, the last sun ray disappeared from the sky, and birds perched in the trees fell silent.

At the pickpocket's practice dummy hanging in the villa archway, Josette waited for me.

"You have the key blank?"

"Of course, but where is Remy?"

"King Jules has requested his presence at supper tonight and every evening until we're finished."

"Then I'll take the key to him."

As I approached the king's table, one of his personal assassins halted me by pressing his large hand against my chest. I held up the key for Remy to see.

"Let him approach," said Jules.

I took the key to Remy and he examined it carefully.

"There's no notches cut in the key blank," grumbled Jules, "how will you get it to work?"

"That's my secret," retorted Remy. Then he studied me as if a thought had suddenly occurred to him. Eventually, he waved me away. "Josette will see to your supper, now go."

I would like to have received praise for the part I'd played so far, or even a thank you for having risked my person in this dangerous adventure, but no, I was simply dismissed by the grown-ups as if I'd done nothing of any consequence. At least supper gave me an excuse to be near Josette again. My stomach had no argument with this arrangement.

With a full belly, I fell asleep in the middle of Josette's room before the Chevalier returned. And once again, I was shaken awake the next morning. Remy pulled me to my feet and turned me to face him.

"You and Josette have another journey to make this morning," he said.

"Am I going back to prison?"

"Yes, but not for keeps, assuming you make no mistakes." He thrust the key blank into my hands and pointed out the newly melted candle wax smeared onto the flange where notches needed to be cut for the key to work. "Gently insert this key into the lock of the cell door where the Bookkeeper is held. Turn the key as far as it will go, then center the key again and carefully extract it from the lock. Don't smudge the wax. Understand?"

I nodded and wondered out loud where my breakfast was to be.

The Chevalier pulled a long loaf of bread from a basket near his feet. He cut one end off the loaf and gave me that piece. The large remainder of the bread went back into the basket where it rested with a ham and two more bottles of wine. All of which I supposed had been supplied by Jules.

While I chewed my bread, Remy produced a chunk of cheese and cut a thick slice, which he laid on my knee. Then he asked a strange question.

"Listen carefully, boy. If I suddenly gave you something to hide for me, would you be able to conceal it someplace on these grounds where no one else is likely to find it?"

I thought of all the places I'd hidden extra coins and stolen food. The coins had been small and easy to hide. The food had been more difficult.

"How large of an item?"

He motioned with both hands spread apart.

"About as wide as this ham . . ."

Then he used the thumb and first finger of one hand.

" . . . and as thick as a generous slice of this same ham.

"What is it you wish hidden?" I asked.

"That's of no matter to you."

I started in on the cheese, still thinking of hiding places.

"Sure, I can do it."

"Then be ready for whenever I need you. In the meantime, off you go."

This trip into the prison was easier but only because many of my fears had been lessened by the success of our prior incursion. I felt almost cocky, right up to the main prison gate, but there was something dismal and haunting about the squalid interior of that stone tower. Just as soon as the door clanked shut behind me, my brain wanted to panic. The guards were soon entertained with a repeat performance of the Bookkeeper's deaf and mute grandson. Again, it required very little acting on my part.

Fortunately, I recovered enough presence of mind in the prison cell to do as the Chevalier had requested. Insert key. Turn. Rotate back to center. Gently extract. Wrap key in cloth. Hide in my shirt. No one had paid the slightest attention to what I was doing. We were back on our hill in the Buttes-Chaumont by noon. Free air never smelled so good.

By now, I had observed that the large blue cloths covering food in the basket when we entered the prison were not in the basket when we left the cell. Many of the white cloth napkins had also failed to make the return journey home with us. I quickly found it was not my place to inquire about their absence. Inside the prison, I had also noticed that Josette and the Bookkeeper did much whispering among themselves while I waited by the cell door to work on the lock, but I had no idea what they discussed. They kept those plans from me, as well as the explanation for the disappearing cloths.

Back at the villa, I found Remy at the table with Jules. This time the king's rough-faced assassins let me pass without hindrance.

"You have what I need?" asked Remy.

I bobbed my head and handed the cloth bundle to Remy. He unwound the cloth and examined the wax on the key blank.

"Very good," he exclaimed. Then he pushed back his chair and made a short bow in the direction of Jules. "If you will excuse me, I have work to do."

Jules waved his hand.

Remy dragged his cloak off the table and threw the heavy cloth over his shoulder. He grabbed my upper arm and steered me

toward Josette's little room. When we reached her three-walled residence, Remy dropped his cloak on the floor and rooted through a wooden box in one corner. He removed a clamp, which he then fastened to one side of the box. The key blank became gripped between the wood of the box and the metal of the clamp. Next, he produced a small file and began to work on the key.

I watched closely. Remy kept filing on the key blank until the edge of the file reached the indentations in the wax. Then he stopped and filed on another part of the key until the file once again reached the markings in the wax. By dark, he had made a false key that would hopefully open the Bookkeeper's cell door. At that point, I felt certain it was back to prison for me again. I slept fitfully that night with dreams of grim-faced prison guards and army officers chasing me through long, dark tunnels that went on and on forever.

When I awoke the next morning in the middle of the room, no one was there. No Josette and no Remy to shake my shoulder. No breakfast awaited me. I peeked outside. The sun was already in the sky.

Out in the yard of the ruined villa, I inquired about my two friends. A beggar in the middle of painting sores on his legs claimed that the Chevalier had gone to meet with Jules. As for Josette, an old woman carrying a live chicken under her arm said she saw Josette set off early this morning with a cloth-covered basket. Remy, Josette, and Jules had set their plan in motion without me. I'd been used and dumped like all the garbage on our hill.

For the rest of the day, I sat on a rock in the shade of a wall and glared at my nobleman across the courtyard. Remy never once glanced my way. He and Jules remained seated at the king's table throughout the afternoon. They ate, drank, laughed, and joked. No doubt the laughter was at my expense. Later, when Josette came to sit beside me after her return from the prison, I turned my back to her and refused to speak.

As the day wore on, Remy and Jules called for more wine and more wine, until at sunset Loup took a bottle for his own and walked off in disgust, leaving one of the other ruffians to act as servant to the king. By now, only two of the rough-faced assassins still stood near the king's table. If my anger had not gradually subsided over the long hours, I would've walked over there and told Remy and Jules what I thought of them for leaving me out.

As it was, when I finally stood to go, I heard a hubbub at the main gate to the villa. Loud voices raised in greeting at the edge of the encampment until they grew into a crescendo of cheering. The uproar moved in my direction. By the flickering light of the

main bonfire I saw the noisy mob following a man toward the king's table. I ran across the courtyard to stand beside the Chevalier in order to see better.

Upon my arrival, Remy stood and pointed at the approaching crowd.

"Look," he shouted, "it's the Bookkeeper."

Jules jumped to his feet and turned to the mob.

In that instant when everyone's eyes were on the commotion, Remy thrust a hard flat object into my stomach and whispered, "Hide this, quickly." Then he pushed me away.

I stuck the object under my shirt and walked unobtrusively around the table and off at a tangent to the approaching crowd. My new hiding place was not far from here.

The crowd halted well back from the king's presence. Only the Bookkeeper, dressed in a shabby uniform that resembled those of a French army officer, continued to the table.

Jules spread his arms wide.

"Welcome, my friend. I see all went well."

"That it did," replied the Bookkeeper, brandishing the false key I had worked so hard to help make. "A little filing on my part to fine tune it as instructed," he said, "and the Chevalier's key worked like magic. Plus, the many blue cloths and white napkins from Josette's baskets of food made a fine uniform, although you'll see I'm not much of a seamstress." He laughed. "However, in the dark, the guards took me for the real thing, and I was out the front door of the prison before they looked too closely."

We had done it. Josette, Remy, and I had opened the cell door of the prison and freed the Bookkeeper. In my joy, I almost forgot what I was to do next and had to hurry.

Jules addressed the people gathered nearby.

"My plan worked well. Now we can return to our regular business of crime. With the book in hand and its keeper to read it, there will be no more arguments of anyone being cheated. Therefore, I wish to hear no grumbling from nameless faces."

I was almost at the near side of the bonfire when I heard the Bookkeeper ask, "Where is the book?"

"Right here on the table," replied Jules, turning back to pick up his wineglass. He studied the table, empty except for two glasses, a standing wine bottle, and Remy's neatly folded cloak. Then he screamed for his assassins to detain anyone close to the table. "And stop that boy." He pointed at me.

I was trapped by the fire in front and a guard on both sides. One of them grabbed me by the arm and dragged me back to the table.

Remy sat nonchalantly in his chair. "Is there a problem?"

"The book is gone," said Jules. Then to his bodyguard, "Search them both."

I was held firmly by one shoulder while unfamiliar hands felt through my clothing and checked over my body. When he was finished, the ruffian looked at Jules and shook his head.

Loup reappeared out of the darkness and placed the point of his sword at the base of the Chevalier's neck. "Stand," he growled.

Remy stood and was instantly searched by one of Jules's men. The man soon stepped back. "Nothing," he said.

Jules called for torches to see under the table and out onto the surrounding ground.

Angry voices in the crowd murmured about the loss of the book. Cries of frustration grew rapid and intense. "We are being cheated again," muttered several in the mob.

Remy reached for his cloak, but Loup beat him to it and shook out the material. Then Loup carefully felt every inch of the cloak. In disgust, he threw it back on the table.

With a hardness in his voice I'd not heard before, the Chevalier slowly turned to Loup. "I have felt the tip of your sword in the back of my neck. Someday soon, you may feel the length of mine in your chest."

Loup raised his sword, but Jules stopped him.

"Not now, we have more important matters. Send men to search the entire villa while you stay with me. One of your men must find the book before this rabble gets out of hand."

Jules beckoned for Remy and me to follow him as he strode to the elegant chair that was his throne near the fire. He sat.

"You two keep within my sight, one on each side of me. No talking between you."

I moved around to the king's left, while Remy stayed at his right. From time to time, Remy would stare wordlessly at me as if trying to ask a question. I merely dropped my gaze to Jules and hoped that the Chevalier could read my mind.

As the hours dragged by, Jules's men reported to him, one by one, whispering in his ear. He quickly sent them out again with new orders. By daybreak, the entire villa had been torn inside out, and each of the inhabitants, including a violently protesting Mother Margaux, had been personally searched. Our little community now bordered on riot.

Jules pursed his lips and slumped on his throne.

Remy stepped in front of him.

"I have been within arm's reach of you since yesterday morning, have I not?" he ventured.

"You have," said Jules.

"And you've had me searched, so you know I don't have your book."

"If you say so."

"But if I *could* find it, what would that be worth to you?"

King Jules sat up straight. His eyes narrowed in interest.

"What would you have?"

"The right to sell my stolen wares directly to any fence in the three parts of Paris. This agreement will cost you nothing."

"True, but I also make nothing off the transactions."

Jules tapped his fingers on the arm of his elegant chair. A stone flew out of the crowd and rolled across the ground at his feet. He glared at the mob.

"Never mind, Chevalier, you have your deal. I need to get this rabble off my back."

Remy leaned forward and whispered in the king's right ear.

Jules leaped off of his throne.

"Which one?"

"I didn't see his face," replied Remy. "In the confusion of the Bookkeeper's arrival, I merely thought the man was putting the book in a safe place for you."

Jules glared at each of his bodyguards as he drew his dagger. Turning to his throne, he inserted the blade into one of the wide rents in the seat cushion and ripped through the upholstery. Grabbing wads of white stuffing with his free hand, he pulled the cushion apart. Underneath lay a thin red book about the size of a thick slice of ham. He held it up for the crowd to see. Cheers rang through the morning haze.

While Jules was distracted, Remy grabbed my hand and steered me in the direction of Josette's little three-walled room.

"You did good, boy. I may have work for you in the future, now that I'm free to sell my own wares again."

I thought about our recent events and contemplated the future.

"What did you whisper in the king's ear?"

The Chevalier laughed.

"I told Jules that one of his own men took the book and hid it in the chair bottom. He'll sleep with one eye open now, wondering who betrayed his trust and how far will it go. Sitting on a throne is always an uneasy proposition."

The deviousness of Remy's words filled me with misgivings. As clever as the Chevalier had shown himself to be, he might easily turn Josette's head in his own direction. What chance had I then with the object of my infatuation? I needed to keep an eye on my nobleman. His declaration of us working together in the future

could soon become a double-edged sword in my life, since it meant he would always be close to my Josette.

I debated with myself for some time that evening. Should I place my newfound talents in the employment of the Chevalier? Yes or no? The answer was at once unsettling, yet the better choice. In spite of any problems this arrangement made, I would somehow find a way to survive on this ancient hill of castaways. Like the old Sicilian that lived with us for several months once said to me, "Keep your friends close at hand, but keep your enemies even closer." For the time being, I wasn't sure which, friend or enemy, Remy would prove to be. Earning food for my empty belly was one thing; the sharp pangs of jealousy in my chest another.

Over time, we would see. We would see. 🐦

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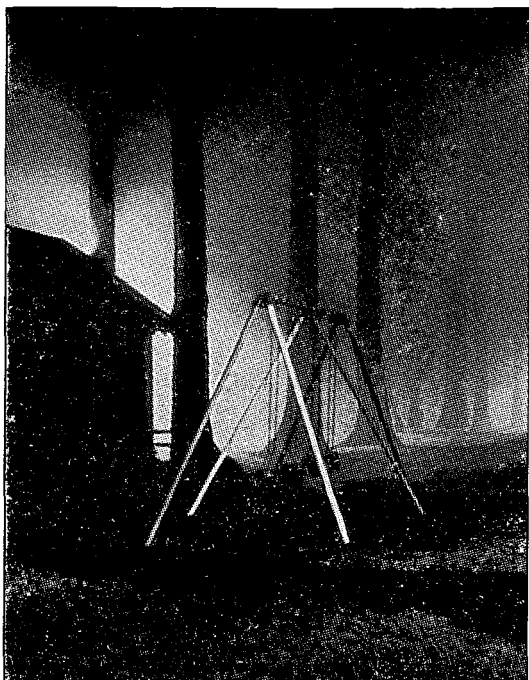
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If It Ain't Got That Swing

We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime) based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to AHMM, Dell Magazines, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, New York 10016. Please label your entry "December Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

The winning entry for the June Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 138.

NO VIDEOTAPING DURING THE MURDER

JOHN H. DIRCKX

Dr. Mickelhaws was the last to get off the chartered bus except for the driver. A fine autumn drizzle was falling as the doctor trailed behind the rest of the senior citizens' group across the parking lot and into the entrance of Weyermueller's Restaurant. On the stairs Ms. Kinnear hovered with her clipboard, herding the crowd along with little yaps of encouragement like a well-trained sheepdog.

The doctor paused on the landing to read the poster displayed there, even though smaller versions of it had been floating around the center for the past month.

TUESDAY DINNER THEATER
THE BRIDES OF DUNRAVEN CASTLE
PLEASE, NO AUDIO RECORDING OR VIDEOTAPING
DURING THE PERFORMANCE

There followed a list of the cast, performance times, and scenes from the play.

As he started on up the stairs, a young woman dashed in out of the rain. "Is this where they're having the play?" she asked. Her face was heavily made up, her hair was wrapped in a scarf, and she was carrying some kind of overnight bag by a wrist loop. Guessing that she was a member of the cast—presumably a supernumerary or a last-minute substitution, since the show had been running every Tuesday for months—he pointed wordlessly at the poster and passed on into the restaurant.

The main dining area was a large square room, admirably suited to dinner theater performances. For tonight's program, the usual decor had been augmented with an enormous candelabrum on each table and festoons of purple and sable crepe around the

walls. An open space in the middle of the room formed the stage, while a booth adjacent to it, enclosed by black screens, served as the wings.

Although a few diners were already seated over cocktails, the group from the Rolf Huizinga Senior Center made up the bulk of the audience tonight. They gradually distributed themselves among the available tables, the ones with rheumatism worrying about drafts and the ones with hearing aids investigating the position of the loudspeakers.

Only two entrees were available—New York strip steak and Vegetarian Rhapsody—and the numbers of each that would be required had been submitted a week ago. The meal therefore began at once without the delay and inconvenience of ordering from a menu. Before the group was fully seated, an army of servers began dispensing soup and salad. They had scarcely finished when the show began with an eruption of wild noise and flashes of light.

Against a background of canned organ music, an invisible announcer welcomed the audience and informed them that the program would consist of two acts, the first to be presented during the soup and salad course and the second to accompany dessert. He then plunged immediately into the introductory narration as members of the cast swept out from behind the screened enclosure and into the open area among the tables.

As the story began, three college girls (a blonde, a brunette, and a redhead) were driving through the mountains of Transylvania during spring break. The blonde was a stereotypic nitwit—effervescent, harebrained, naive. Despite her makeup and wig, it was obvious that the actress playing the part of the blonde was at least ten years older than her companions.

Having lost their way during a violent storm, the girls sought refuge at Dunraven Castle, where they were welcomed by a menagerie of comic horror figures, consisting of the proprietor, Lord Anthony Kilbride, his lame and hunchbacked flunky, Igor, and a chorus of "wraiths"—pale, melancholy female figures prancing and posturing in gauzy pastel robes. The actor portraying Lord Anthony was tall and somberly handsome, with a Vandyke beard and a mesmeric gaze. While he led his visitors among the tables on a tour of the castle, he and the other cast members engaged in giddy and often highly physical interaction with the diners.

The plot, a clumsy blend of Bluebeard and the Dracula legend, gradually unfolded to a lead-footed, sophomoric script loaded with bad puns and maladroitness allusions to current events. Lord Anthony had been married several times, and his wives had all

died one after another in mysterious circumstances. With increasing fervor, he paid court to each of his guests in turn, but it was evident that Gloria DeVoyd, the blonde, had attracted his particular attention.

By the end of Act I, two of the girls were planning to go on with their trip, while Gloria had decided to remain in Transylvania and become the latest bride of Dunraven Castle. "Stay tuned," boomed the announcer, "for the gripping conclusion of our story." The spotlights faded, the diners applauded, and the serving staff reappeared to clear away empty dishes and bring on the main course.

The members of the cast now assembled at one of the tables bordering the performance area and joined the rest of the guests for dinner. Although they dropped their roles during the meal, they didn't abandon their mood of eerie jocularity in their bantering exchanges with the guests.

As soon as the servers began removing the main course dishes and distributing dessert, the players disappeared once again behind the black screens. For Act II, all the electric lights in the dining room were extinguished, the flickering candles now providing the only illumination. Again the action began with storm effects, created by a strobe light and volleys of recorded thunder. Lord Anthony and his new bride returned to Dunraven Castle from their honeymoon to find Igor and the resident wraiths just as weird and gruesome as ever.

The story creaked on toward its conclusion from one moronic sight gag to the next. The table at which the cast had just dined now formed part of the set as the newlyweds sat down to a homecoming banquet while the storm raged outside. It gradually became evident that Gloria wasn't such a bimbo after all—that, in fact, she was planning to be not only Lord Anthony's last bride, but also his first widow.

In the climactic scene, Lord Anthony opened a magnum of champagne and filled two glasses. When he turned to put the bottle back into the ice bucket, Gloria added a pinch of powder to his champagne. But something in her manner aroused his suspicions, so when she wasn't looking he reversed the glasses. Hearing the clink of the glasses on the table, she changed them back when *he* wasn't looking.

There ensued a series of three or four further switches, the person doing the switching resorting to increasingly ludicrous and improbable ruses to distract the other. At length, Gloria outwitted her husband by picking up the drinks and setting them down again in the same places. After Lord Anthony switched them one final time, they both drank. Then, amid a screeching cacophony of

music and flickering light; he dropped his glass, clutched his throat, and collapsed in agony on the floor. The wraiths fluttered around him, alternately bending to caress his brow and raising their hands in mute appeals to heaven. Gloria sipped her champagne with calm detachment while watching his final moments.

Dr. Mickelhaws's seat happened to be at one of the tables adjoining the stage area. The first intimation the other guests had that anything was amiss occurred when Mickelhaws sprang up and knelt beside the writhing figure on the floor. In the frantically flashing light, he bent over Lord Anthony, feeling for a pulse in his neck while forcing his head back to clear his airway.

With jarring suddenness, the doctor's shoulders were violently gripped from behind and his body flung sideways into the black shadows under the nearest table. His head struck something as hard as a telephone pole and the shadows engulfed him completely.

The driveway to the parking lot at Weyermueller's Restaurant was completely blocked by two ambulances and two cruisers. Detective Sergeant Cyrus Auburn parked across the street in the covered pickup area in front of a dance studio, which was closed at this hour of the night. Two charter coaches were parked end to end along one side of the restaurant lot. The drivers stood smoking in the shelter of the portico, with the stoic resignation of their kind.

The entry hall of the restaurant looked like the aftermath of a natural disaster. Two ambulance crews, each with enough gear to support a polar expedition, were busily ministering to their respective patients. A young woman in a server's uniform was receiving oxygen by mask, while an old man with a bulky dressing on his head glared malignly at the paramedic who was taking his blood pressure.

No one paid any attention to Auburn. As he crossed the hall and entered the restaurant proper, he caught a glimpse of a large private dining room on his right, where the entire roster of a nursing home seemed to be assembled in somber silence.

The main dining area was vacant except for four people, three of them uniformed Public Safety officers, conversing near the center of the room. On all sides Auburn saw evidence of a hasty evacuation—chairs shoved back from the tables in a mad jumble, napkins wadded up and thrown down at random, a dish of ice cream at each place melting into an unappetizing glop. No one had thought to blow out the candles. At the side of the dining room, a tall enclosure formed by black folding screens was evidently part of the theater arrangements. A pylon extending upward from within the enclosure carried banks of lights and speakers.

The center of interest seemed to be a cleared space among the tables. Patrolman Fritz Dollinger came to meet Auburn.

"What have we got here," Auburn asked him, "a gang war? They only mentioned one casualty when they called from downtown."

"What can I tell you, Sergeant? A lot can happen in a short time. And, by the way, we are downtown."

Auburn studied the supine and lifeless figure on the floor, a man of tall and imposing build. His complexion was cadaverous under a full beard and the smeared remains of a film of greasepaint. Monitor leads placed by the paramedics were still sticking to his chest amid the shredded remnants of his shirt.

"Do we have a positive ID?"

"Professor Desmond Cossegrin, age forty-six. Chairman of the drama department at the university. His wife has a part in the play too. She goes by her maiden name of Westgaard. She's in the manager's office right now, having hysterics or maybe trying for an Oscar, I'm not sure which."

Auburn looked around at the props on the table next to the body—a bowl of plastic fruit, a platter of plastic pork chops, a genuine-looking champagne bottle in an ice bucket, one glass on the table and another on the floor.

"The lieutenant said cyanide?"

"If you get within a yard of him, you'll smell it. If you get any closer than that, you might end up like the gal out there in the lobby."

Auburn didn't need to get within a yard to detect the pungent, acrid chemical fumes. "Like to give me an outline of what happened?" he asked.

"We're still trying to put it together. This gentleman was here . . ." A tall, wiry man was explaining something to the other two officers with brisk, sweeping gestures as if he were swatting flies. His long, mobile face was deeply creased like a camel's.

He identified himself as "Bish" Gardner, director of the play. "I was just telling these officers about the champagne. It isn't really champagne, just ginger ale. We chill the bottle in a freezer, pour in three cans of ice-cold ginger ale with a funnel, and then shove in the plastic plug." He was doing the gestures over again for Auburn's benefit. "Just before we plug it, we add a big pinch of baking powder. And here in the bucket—"

"Please don't touch that, sir."

"—we put hot water instead of ice. All in the name of illusion, you know. So that the plug will pop out with a noise like a firecracker, and the champagne will foam and froth like the real thing."

"Who's in charge of fixing up the champagne bottle?"

"I am."

"Do you use the same bottle every time?"

"Yes, and the same wire on the plug. But I put on fresh aluminum foil each time." When Gardner wasn't gesturing, his hands shook.

"Who might have had access to the bottle?"

Gardner shrugged. "Lots of people. I fixed up that bottle after the performance last Tuesday. We store our stuff during the week in a cupboard back in the kitchen, but it isn't locked."

Auburn took another look around him. An upper gallery, which had been draped with black and purple crepe for the occasion, overlooked the main dining room on two sides. A sky-blue banner, hanging from one of the gallery railings proclaimed in shiny silver letters:

ROLF HUIZINGA SENIOR CENTER OF WILMOT

"THE GOOD DIE YOUNG"

"So could somebody describe what happened here this evening?" he asked for the third time.

Gardner pointed to the screened enclosure. "I was there in the production booth the whole time. Our music and narration all come off a CD, which I play through the sound system. That sets the pace and gives the cues for the whole performance. The actors with speaking parts wear clip-on microphones, and their dialogue also goes through the sound system. I can't see much from where I am, and all I hear is what comes through my headphones."

"Let's start with what you did see and hear."

"Okay. The climax of the play comes in the second act when the female lead slips the male lead a dose of poison in a glass of champagne. He takes a sip and does a slapstick death scene—"

"Slapstick?"

"Well, sure, it's a comedy, you know? He gives it this and he gives it that." Gardner accompanied his words with a pantomime of Lord Anthony's final agonies. "And then he drops down dead." His gaze strayed to the body on the floor and immediately rebounded elsewhere. "And that's exactly what Cossegrin did."

"Does the woman drink too?"

Gardner pondered for a moment. "Yes and no. They both act like they're drinking. But I wouldn't think either one of them would actually taste the stuff. I mean—ginger ale and baking powder?" He made a face like a camel tasting a batch of moldy figs.

"You said she slips some poison in his glass?"

"Again, strictly illusion. She goes through the motions of drop-

ping something into one of the glasses. By candlelight, the audience can't tell that she doesn't really drop anything in."

"Then again," observed Auburn, "they probably couldn't tell if she really did. Where are the other people in the cast?"

"They're all in one of the private dining rooms," said Dollinger. "Except for the victim's wife. She's lying down on a couch in the manager's office."

"So what happened to those two people out in the lobby?"

"That's the only part I saw," said Gardner. "I heard a strange voice coming through my headphones saying, 'Somebody call 911.' At first I thought it was just somebody in the audience playing it for a gag—they do that all the time, especially the ones that had a couple of martinis before dinner. Then he said it again, much louder, as if he were trying to make himself heard over the music. So I peeked out to see what was going on."

"During that part of the show, we use a strobe light to enhance the shock effect of the death scene. That makes everything look jerky and distorted, but I could see a couple of people on the floor here next to Cossegrin. One of them was bent over him as if he were trying to resuscitate him. Then the other one—one of the waitresses—slammed into him like an express train, shoved him out of the way, and started jumping up and down on Cossegrin. By the time I cut the sound and put on the lights, she was whooping and gagging and rolling around on the floor, doing her own slapstick death scene."

Dollinger consulted a notebook. "Morgan Carruth, age thirty-one. Certified EMT. Says waitressing pays better. She realized something was wrong with Cossegrin and tried to help him. But when she gave him mouth-to-mouth, she got her own dose of cyanide."

"Has the coroner been notified?" asked Auburn.

"Coroner's investigator and evidence technician are both on the way."

Auburn nodded and turned back to Gardner. "Any idea who might be behind this? Any recent feuds, threats, friction in the group?"

"I'm not aware of any trouble Professor Cossegrin was having with anybody, but actually I know very little about his private life. I sell and service audio equipment." He fished a card out of his pocket and handed it to Auburn. "I just do this on Tuesday nights for the fun of it." Suddenly realizing that the fun was over, he fell silent.

Back in the lobby, where Auburn went in search of other witnesses, he met a woman striding energetically up and down while

talking on a cell phone and gesturing with a clipboard to the empty air. As soon as she saw Auburn she rang off.

"Hi, Sergeant. Kate Kinnear." She shook hands with a grip like a nutcracker. "I know your mother from United Way breakfasts. I'm hoping we can expedite things a bit here. Sixty-seven people, not counting the bus drivers and me, have been waiting patiently for forty-five minutes to be interviewed. Some of our folks run out of steam around this time of night, and some of them start seeing goblins. It'll take ten minutes to herd them into the buses, and then we've got a twenty-five-minute ride back to the center in the rain."

Ms. Kinnear seemed to have developed the knack, like a professional clarinetist, of inhaling through her nose while blasting away uninterruptedly through her mouth.

"A lot of the folks don't drive," she continued, "at least after dark, so family members will be waiting at the center to pick them up and take them home. Some of them will be worried, and some will be spitting nails. Here—the restaurant man made you a photocopy of my list. That's everybody that's here tonight, with addresses, phone numbers, and backup phone numbers. The main point is that none of our people were close enough to see anything, and they certainly didn't have anything to do with that man's death. Except of course Dr. Mickelhaws."

"Doctor who?"

"Mickelhaws—that man sitting over there on the stretcher with a thing like a turban on his head."

"One of your professional staff?"

"Goodness no, just a member. He—uh—got in the way of a very determined paramedic."

"I heard about that. And what's become of the paramedic?"

"They just took her to the hospital. Something about her color, I think."

In the large private-banqueting room that Auburn had noticed on his way in, the group from the senior center were huddled in mute dejection, like people waiting for a plane that has just crashed on the other side of the mountains. Although a few of them were talking quietly in groups, most of them were just sitting there yawning.

"I know you all want to get home," Auburn told them, "and I don't see any point in holding you up any longer. Unless somebody has any information that might help us figure out what happened here tonight?" Blank stares. "Were any of you acquainted with the man who died, Desmond Cossegrin? Or with any of the other people in the production? Okay. I think you can go. I'm giving Ms.

Kinnear some of my cards. If anybody thinks of something they'd like to tell me privately, I'll be here for a while yet."

He found the owner-manager of the restaurant, Karl-Heinz Weyermueller, pacing morosely outside the open door of his office. Stocky and bald, with small restless eyes like a lizard's, Weyermueller exactly matched Hollywood's conception of a sinister *Oberst* in the gestapo. He eyed Auburn's ID with deep disapproval, as if the murder in his restaurant and the adverse publicity it would bring were all Auburn's fault.

"The players are waiting in the small dining room," he said, with an accent as piquant as sauerkraut juice. "The door you just passed."

"I'm looking for Cossegrin's wife. I understand she's in your office."

"Ah, no. Miss Westgaard's son came and took her home. You could have got nothing from her tonight. She is completely broken down."

"What can you tell me about what happened?"

"Really nothing. I was in the kitchen when the music stopped. We thought at first maybe an electrical failure. Then we heard people screaming, and we thought maybe fire. But the truth was worse even than that."

"You say the cast are waiting in here?"

"Yes, but I wish you would talk with my staff first. We have been closed already one hour, and I am still paying."

The staff, not counting the waitress who had been taken to the hospital, consisted of a chef, three cooks, five servers, and three helpers. The kitchen had been shut down for the night, and the helpers were just finishing up in the dish room. The rest were idling in their street clothes. Nobody had seen or heard anything that might help to explain how or why Cossegrin had been poisoned. Dollinger, who had compiled a list of their names and addresses, showed Auburn the large cupboard where the props for the show were stored. It had no lock and was now quite empty.

At the door of the small private dining room Auburn met a young woman just coming out.

"Wait a minute, miss." Auburn identified himself. "Are you in the play?"

She looked as if she hadn't slept in three days or had a square meal in three months. Her features were tautly drawn, and the purplish shadows under her eyes hadn't come out of a makeup kit. "Yes. Well, sort of. I mean, I don't have a speaking part. I'm a wraith."

"You're a which?"

"A wraith. Kind of a disembodied spirit." She waved one hand in a vaguely ethereal gesture, and Auburn wondered if she might be a little tipsy. "This was my first time. You can believe it'll be my last."

"Were you in the scene where all the excitement happened?"

"Yes. The wraiths come on as soon as Lord Anthony falls down and pretends to be dying. Only he wasn't pretending."

"So what did you see? Or hear?"

She rubbed her eyes, maybe to bring back images and maybe to drive them away. "I was waiting behind the screen with the other two wraiths for our cue. When it came, we ran out and bent down, one at a time, next to Professor Cossegrin. The strobe light was flashing, so it was hard to see anything very clearly. I remember thinking he was overdoing the dying bit, gasping and throwing his arms around, since hardly any of the audience could see him down there on the floor.

"And I smelled something like—oh, like you'd smell in a hospital or a factory, a strong chemical. They say it was cyanide." She shivered. "Then we came out from between the tables and ran around the room. I was at the far end, by the entrance, when the music stopped and the lights came on and everybody started screaming. And that's all I know."

"You said this was your first time?"

"Yes. Professor Cossegrin signed me up. Believe me, it wasn't worth twenty dollars. I wouldn't go through this again for two grand."

"Are you a student in the drama department?"

"No, accounting. He's my landlord. I mean was. He owned some apartment buildings next to the campus."

"Did you have anything to do with the props tonight? The fake champagne or the glasses?"

"No." She shrugged. "I didn't even know it was fake."

He made a note of her name, Jillian Devisser, on a three-by-five-inch file card and went on into the dining room.

The four women and one man whom Auburn found sitting around the table in the private dining room, all in their early twenties, had been better taken care of than the elderly dinner guests from Wilmot. Each of them was working on a second or third beer. Like Jillian Devisser, some were still wearing parts of their costumes. Dressing cases were strewn over the table and empty chairs.

Auburn identified himself and explained why he was there.

"One of us is missing," said one of the women. "She just went to the little girls' room."

"I talked to Ms. Devisser out in the hall."

"Do we have to be fingerprinted?"

"Not unless the evidence technician finds a weapon of some kind."

"How could there be a weapon?" asked the man. "I mean, he was poisoned with cyanide."

"A bottle of it could turn up somewhere."

If any of these people were grieving for the late Professor Cossegrin, they weren't showing it. In their advanced state of exhilaration and garrulity, there didn't seem to be much point in trying for individual interviews. Auburn sat at the head of the table and laid out a stack of file cards. "I don't want to keep you here any longer than necessary," he said. "If you could just give me your names first . . . ?"

Molly Mitzlin, twenty, was a drama student and played the part of Becky Thinker, one of the three college girls in the play. Jessica Brauer, nineteen, also a drama student, wore a red wig and portrayed Ruby Shooz. Both girls were enrolled in courses and programs with Professor Cossegrin but denied having had any extracurricular contacts with him, other than their roles in *The Brides of Dunraven Castle*.

The other two girls, Sarah Calecot and Kelsey Ruhack, played wraiths and had no lines to speak. "All we do is run around and act creepy," explained Sarah. Like Jillian Devisser, they were students at the university but weren't enrolled in the theater program and had only a passing acquaintance with Professor Cossegrin.

Jillian came back while Auburn was talking to the lone male, Brad Benediktus. Brad played the part of Igor, Lord Anthony's henchman, and also served as assistant director, helping Bish Gardner manipulate the lighting and other effects at certain times during the performance. Brad was handsome in a rakish, roguish way, with hair swirling in serpentine coils over his collar. He was a chemical engineering student and worked in dinner theater "because it's fun to dress up and walk around with a fake limp and talk like you've got a mouthful of jelly beans. And also," he added, holding up an empty beer bottle, "the pay is great."

The cast told a reasonably coherent story of the events leading up to Cossegrin's death. Although the two girls who played Gloria DeVoyd's companions had big parts in Act I, they didn't reappear until the end of Act II. During the scene in which Cossegrin had died, they had been touching up their makeup in the office, which the management let them use as a dressing room. They hadn't known anything was wrong until Weyermueller barged in to call for an ambulance.

As Jillian Devisser had already told Auburn, the wraiths had

passed right by the dying professor without realizing that, for once, his mortal agonies were genuine. But both of the other girls had also noticed the strong chemical smell.

"How about you?" Auburn asked Brad. "Did you smell it?"

"Not then, but I smelled it later. It was cyanide, all right."

"Any idea how it got in the fake champagne?"

"No, sir. Bish takes care of all that. I just do my Igor bit and handle the board for the horror scenes. And that's where I was while Cossegrin was dying. Flipping switches."

"Does anybody have any idea who might have had it in for Professor Cossegrin?"

The women squirmed and looked at each other, but Brad wasn't so diffident.

"Oh boy," he said, and threw up his hands in a massive shrug. "The guy was arrogant, egotistical, and overbearing. You couldn't spend five minutes around him without wanting to bash him. Probably every single kid who's ever been enrolled in the drama department had some kind of working plan, in less than a week, for doing him in."

"That's not fair," objected Molly Mitzlin. "Sure, he was a hard coach. He pushed you to toughen you up where you needed it. But that's what coaches are for. Does the football coach cancel practice because it's raining?"

"I'm not talking about the way he directed plays," said Brad. "I'm talking about the way he used and manipulated and stomped on everybody he came in contact with in real life."

"Well, I'm sorry, but I just didn't feel that way about him," said Jessica.

"No, because he treated women different. Way different. You got a nice dose of anesthetic before he started pushing you around, running your life. . . ."

"What anesthetic?" demanded Jessica. Auburn wondered if the indignation was real or just something Cossegrin had taught her during one of those coaching sessions.

"Charm, charisma, seduction," said Brad, "call it whatever you want. He could turn it on and off like a strobe light."

"You're just jealous."

"Jessica, did you know there were two other male parts besides Lord Anthony and Igor in the original script of *The Brides of Dunraven Castle*? And that Cossegrin wrote them out because he didn't want to share the attention of the women in the audience with any other guys in the cast—except maybe a hunchbacked clown wearing a wig like a toilet brush? But *I'm* the one who's jealous?"

"Brad, he cut out those parts because his sense of theater told him the larger cast wouldn't work in the restaurant setting."

"I hate to interrupt this," said Auburn, "but it's getting late. Does anybody know of any particular enemies the professor might have made recently? Any shake-ups or conflicts at the university, anybody he fired, any threats?"

Since these and further questions yielded no responses, he thanked them and sent them home.

He found the restaurant lobby deserted except for Dr. Mickelhaws and two paramedics, who were packing up their equipment and getting ready to leave.

Auburn drew one of them aside. "Did you take care of Cossegrin before he died?"

"No, sir. That was the downtown crew. They were first on the scene, and when they saw he was already gone, they moved on to the next most serious victim."

"I understand they took her to the hospital."

"Correct, sir. Her pulse and respirations were both irregular, and the doc in the box said better run her in."

The man who sat hunched on the wheeled stretcher appeared to be about seventy. He was sallow complexioned, flat faced, and hollow chested, and his waxy features seemed set in a mask of perpetual chagrin. His tie was loose, his jacket awry, his head encircled by an elastic wrap holding an ice pack in place.

"Dr. Mickelhaws?"

"Retired," snapped the other, as if determined not to start off the interview with even the slightest misunderstanding. He put on a pair of steel-rimmed glasses, peered briefly through them at Auburn and his photo ID, apparently wasn't much impressed by what he saw, and took them off again.

"I hear you got quite a knock on the head."

"If you want to call things by their right names, I was the victim of negligent battery."

Auburn was tempted to advise the doctor to stick to medicine and stop concocting meaningless legal terms, but instead he asked him to describe what had happened during the performance.

"The play was utter juvenile claptrap—sheer drivel from beginning to end. As soon as things started to look real, I knew something was wrong. Even with that light clicking off and on four times a second, I could tell that the main character, Lord Whatsit, was in genuine respiratory distress. And then I got a whiff of cyanide."

"How did you know it was cyanide?"

Mickelhaws scowled at him. "Because it's my business to know

such things. I practiced medicine for forty-three years. Spent about eighteen of them doing part-time occupational medicine at Quintilian Corporation and a couple of other factories. You smell that stuff once and you don't forget it. That is, if you survive."

"So what did you do?"

"As soon as those loopy females got finished romping by in their peignoirs, I went to see what I could do for him. He still had a pulse, but by that time he was already unresponsive and barely breathing. I tried to get somebody to call for an ambulance, but they couldn't hear me over the loudspeakers. And then lightning struck."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean one of the waitresses slammed into me like a charging elephant and knocked me into the middle of next week. I bashed this left temple on the leg of a table, and that's all I knew for three or four minutes. When I came to, halfway under the table, nobody even knew I was there. They were all running around in circles watching the guy die and wondering why that waitress wasn't looking too good either."

"I understand she's an EMT."

Dr. Mickelhaws's frown became positively venomous. "Fiddlesticks. All they know is cookbook medicine. 'When lips turn blue, add oxygen. Beat vigorously until eyes pop open.' I'd rather take my chances on bleeding to death or dying of a heart attack than have one of those ninety-day wonders working on me."

The crew members who had been taking care of Mickelhaws had retreated, ostensibly out of earshot, but the old man was doing his best to make sure they heard every word. "They have no more professional commitment than a shoe salesman, and no more judgment than a . . . a blind goose. What they don't know is terrifying. They've got more blank circuits than a gang of nurses, and that's saying something."

For reasons not immediately apparent, Mickelhaws was evidently brim full of bitterness and hostility against health care professionals who didn't happen to have medical degrees. Since Auburn didn't have the time to stand around listening to the full catalog of his prejudices and grievances, he wound up the interview as swiftly as possible. The doctor had no prior acquaintance with Cossegrin or with any of the people in the production. When Auburn left him he was signing a release for the paramedics and grumbling that the buses had left without him.

As Auburn was starting down the stairs to the entrance, Nick Stamaty, the investigator from the coroner's office, was just coming in with his field kit and camera.

"Evening, Cy," said Stamaty. "You want to be walking tall and smiling wide when you step out there. There are two TV crews set up outside with their cameras pointed at the front door."

Auburn went back up the stairs and into the restaurant with Stamaty, giving him a quick summary of the case. Then he slipped out through the delivery entrance into the alley behind the restaurant. He reached his car by a circuitous route, getting thoroughly saturated with cold rain in the process, and headed for Chalfont Hospital.

He found Morgan Carruth in a curtained cubicle in the emergency department, drinking coffee from a Styrofoam cup and gossiping with a nurse or technician in a scrub suit that needed scrubbing. A monitor mounted on the wall behind her was blinking and giving digital readouts of her vital functions.

"Ms. Carruth?"

She twisted awkwardly on the gurney and gazed at him with the fuzzy look of a nearsighted person who has lost her glasses. "I'm Morgan."

Auburn showed identification. "Do you feel up to talking about what happened at the restaurant?" Her companion vanished amid a billowing of curtains.

"Sure." She put down her cup and straightened her hospital gown. An adhesive dressing showed where blood had been drawn from one arm—an arm that was pure Grade A beef. Auburn wouldn't have wanted to get in her way as Dr. Mickelhaws had done.

"According to my information, you're one of the regular waitresses at Weyermueller's?"

"Servers. Correct."

"How long have you worked there?"

"Full-time, part-time—about two years."

"You're also an EMT?"

"Correct. I got laid off from the city crew last spring when they cut their budget, and that's when I went full-time at the restaurant."

"Could you describe what happened tonight?"

"Okay. At the end of the show we pass out dishes of ice cream to everybody. I had set up folding stands, three of them, along the east side of the room, and I was trying not to fall on my face or trip any of the cast with that strobe light zapping off and on. All of a sudden one of the guests jumps up and squeezes between the tables into the stage area. He kneels down beside the actor who's pretending to be dying and starts waving his hands and shouting '911.'"

"Hey, I didn't know this guy was a doctor. To me he looked just like your generic senior citizen who had one too many cocktails."

Then I realized that the actor on the floor wasn't acting anymore. So I moved in and started basic life support. He wasn't breathing, and he didn't have a pulse. I figured it had to be a heart attack. I gave him a couple of breaths, mouth to mouth, and started external cardiac compressions. And then I passed out cold myself, because he wasn't having any heart attack—somebody had slipped him a dose of cyanide, and I sucked in enough of those fumes to kill a dog."

"Do you know any of the people in the cast personally?"

"No. Most of them I see every Tuesday, but I've never had any direct contact with them."

Auburn called headquarters from the hospital lobby to make a progress report and order background checks on Cossegrin and his wife and all the people he'd talked to, then went home.

The papers next morning exploited all the sensational possibilities afforded by the commission of a murder during the performance of a mystery thriller. Background probes had thus far been completed on only two members of the cast, and there was no word at all yet from the forensic lab on the analysis of the champagne and the glasses (which were actually plastic), or from the coroner's office on the results of the autopsy.

At nine thirty A.M. Auburn called Cossegrin's home, identified himself to the young male who answered, and asked to talk to Mrs. Cossegrin.

"She can't talk to anybody."

"Who am I talking to, please?"

"This is Dewey. Her son."

"Please accept my sympathies. I know this is a bad time for the family, but I'd like to arrange to talk to your mother sometime today."

"She hasn't got anything to say to any reporters or cops. She had nothing to do with any cyanide, and she doesn't know who did."

"Maybe so," said Auburn, "but I need to hear that from her."

After a brief delay a woman's voice came on the line. Again Auburn identified himself and expressed sympathy. "Would it be possible for me to come by and talk to you for a few moments? I'll keep it brief."

"I—yes, yes. All right. We might as well get it over with."

The rain had stopped during the night; but the sky looked like a canopy of hammered lead that might come crashing down at any moment.

The Cossegrins lived in a two-story frame house near the campus, in an older neighborhood traditionally occupied by tenured faculty and members of the university administration. Auburn was

admitted by a young man in his early twenties wearing combat boots with the laces missing, short spiky hair with frosted tips, and a steel ring with a jade stone in his left eyebrow—unmistakably Dewey Cossegrin. During Auburn's interview with his mother, Dewey hovered in the background, glowering with vague menace.

The widow was a tall, very slender woman in her middle forties. She looked haggard in spite of a considerable amount of makeup. Her legal name was Julianne Cossegrin, but professionally she was Julia Westgaard. "I was already pretty well along in my career when Dewey's father died," she explained, "so I kept his name even after my second marriage." Like the two drama students Auburn had interviewed at the restaurant, she radiated a kind of stage presence, an artificial poise that effectively concealed whatever emotions she might be experiencing. But she was a singer, not an actress, and she was obviously piqued that Auburn didn't already know that.

Her version of what had happened during the last performance of *The Brides of Dunraven Castle* tallied with what he had already heard from other witnesses. She denied having put anything whatsoever into Cossegrin's champagne glass. "And I can't believe Desmond took even a little sip from that glass. Actors never really eat or drink anything during a performance. Swans can swallow gracefully; people can't. You can't say your lines with something in your mouth, unless your character is meant to be a complete slob. Swallowing can throw off your timing, change your voice, make you choke. And anyway, that stuff Bish puts in the bottle foams up like shampoo."

"Did you smell anything in your glass?"

"Nothing. I was on the other side of the table from Desmond when he started having trouble. I only smelled that chemical after I went around to him, after it was all over."

Did she have any idea who might have poisoned Cossegrin?

"I've tried to think, and I just can't. Some people look for peace and order in their lives. Desmond was just the opposite. He was driven by chaos. He put everything off to the last minute—income taxes, airplane tickets, learning lines—because the only way he could function was with Time nipping at his heels. He could be—he *was* exasperating. It drove people around him crazy. But you don't kill somebody for a reason like that."

She apologized for leaving the restaurant before giving a statement. "I felt like I was going to break down any minute. All those people trying to be sympathetic and just making it worse. I called and left a message for Dewey to pick me up as soon as he got off work."

"Where do you work?" Auburn asked Dewey.

"Couple places. Last night I was at Hobart-Royale. It's a telemarketing job."

Auburn hoped the young man's telephone style was more gracious with potential customers than it was with police detectives.

A visitor was just coming up the walk as Auburn left the house. He recognized the trademark beard and sandals of the Reverend Randy Stickle, whose much-publicized triumph over drugs and alcohol had earned him a place in local folklore. Evidently the recognition was mutual.

"How are they doing today, Officer?"

"Composed."

The minister nodded. "I was here with them until two o'clock this morning. Just having Desmond Cossegrin out of the house seemed to contribute substantially to the general tranquillity."

"I gather he could be hard to live with."

"If the Devil has nightmares, Cossegrin is in them somewhere."

"You don't hesitate to speak ill of the dead," remarked Auburn, who found Reverend Stickle's manner faintly irritating.

"Oh, I'm not judging him, just describing him. Desmond Cossegrin always struck me as a man who was right on the verge of being completely overwhelmed by his own awesomeness. And woe betide the person who saw things any other way.

"But Julia is a saint. She understood him and managed somehow to put up with him. And she'll get over losing him too. The one I'm worried about is Dewey. He was only seven when his father killed himself, and it scarred him for life. He's had terrific emotional problems ever since. He thinks he's some kind of militant neo-Nazi, but the poor kid is just another lost soul with scrambled ideas."

"Was Dewey close to his stepfather?"

"Oh no. Quite the reverse. Resented him from day one, defied him at every opportunity. But that's just the sort of situation that sets up a person for an exaggerated grief reaction after a death, due to the heavy guilt feelings."

Another amateur shrink heard from, thought Auburn. Then again, maybe he wasn't an amateur. "Have you been counseling Dewey?"

"Oh no. His needs go a good deal beyond the scope of pastoral counseling. He's twenty-three or -four and he's never kept a full-time job for more than a few weeks. Started college two or three times, and each time he lasted about a month. He must have had half a dozen different psychologists working with him through grade school and high school. I will say this, though—he's been doing a lot better the past few months since they got him in with

Fiona Cremner-Bate. I'm sure you've heard of her." Auburn hadn't.

When he got back to headquarters, his desk was piled high with fresh documents. The forensic pathologist's preliminary autopsy report listed cyanide poisoning as the principal cause of death but included rib fracture with pleural and pericardial tears, due to resuscitation efforts, as a possible contributory cause.

A test of Cossegrin's blood showed a lethal level of cyanide, but there was none in the gastric contents. Moreover, analysis of the liquid in the champagne bottle and of residues left in the glasses confirmed the presence of ginger ale and baking powder but showed no trace of anything else—no alcohol, no drugs, and no cyanide.

Before even looking at any of the other reports, Auburn went to the forensic lab on the top floor to consult with Sergeant Kestrel, the director of the lab, as to the significance of these contradictory findings.

"If he didn't swallow the cyanide," Auburn asked him, "how did it get in his blood?"

"It could have been given by injection," said Kestrel, "but they didn't find any puncture wounds in his skin. It had to be by inhalation. A couple whiffs of concentrated hydrocyanic acid gas or cyanogen fluoride can be lethal within a few minutes."

"But how do you get somebody to inhale cyanide in front of a hundred people? How would you even carry the stuff around?"

"In a pressurized container of some kind."

"What are we talking about? Something like an oxygen cylinder, a fire extinguisher . . . ?"

"Wouldn't have to be that big," Kestrel reached across the laboratory bench and pulled a big square aluminum field kit toward him. Raising the lid, he folded out an awesome succession of compartmented trays, each containing materials and instruments in precise geometric arrangement. From the bottom of the case he drew a device about the size and shape of a marking pen, except that it was fitted with a small adjustable jet nozzle. "Pocket torch," he said. "Easily concealed."

He wrapped his long bony fingers around it to illustrate the point. "All kinds of things come in pressured containers these days. Look around at the drugstore or the grocery. Hair spray, furniture polish, asthma medicine, insect repellent, car wax, pepper gas . . ."

"But surely not cyanide?"

"You could refill something as small as this torch with cyanide gas if you had access to the necessary equipment. And too many people do. There are wildcat outfits everywhere out there refilling propane tanks for domestic heating, oxygen and acetylene

cylinders for welding, you name it. It's a major safety problem, because they overfill cylinders, put in the wrong gases, force the wrong valves on the cylinders . . ."

"But where would you get the cyanide gas in the first place?"

"It's widely used in industry. Metal, rubber, plastic."

"I know, and photography. But in the form of a gas?"

"Sure, sometimes. And they use the gas to fumigate warehouses for vermin. Plenty of opportunities for a guy working in a certain kind of factory to grab himself some cyanide."

Auburn had requested basic record probes on the cast of the play and the staff of the restaurant, as well as on Bish Gardner and Dr. Mickelhaws. None of them, not even the arrogant and ego-centric Professor Cossegrin, had had any brushes with the law. Julia Westgaard's first husband, Virgil, had been a lawyer. Arthur Mickelhaws, M.D., had retired after conducting a family practice in Wilmot for more than forty years.

Auburn spent an hour researching cyanide on the Web and possible local sources of it in the Yellow Pages. In order to work out a timetable of events at the restaurant, he went to the dispatchers' room and played back the tape of Karl-Heinz Weyermueller's frantic call for help, which had been logged at 7:43 P.M. While Auburn was still there, one of the dispatchers referred a call to him.

A man's voice, strident and brash, asked, "Is this the detective who's investigating the death at the restaurant last night?"

"Yes, sir. Who's calling, please?"

"If I had a videotape of the whole thing, how much would the police pay for it?"

"You say you have—"

"How much?"

"That would depend on whether the tape contains any evidence we don't already have, and whether it can be proved to be authentic."

"This would all be confidential, right?"

"That might be hard to manage if your tape has to go to court."

"I'll call you back."

The call had been made from a phone booth at the Greyhound bus station on the south side of town. A videotape of "the whole thing," thought Auburn, would be too good to be true. Just when he'd been handed the impossible challenge of figuring out how Cossegrin could have been given a fatal whiff of cyanide before witnesses, a videotape might solve everything. But it was probably a hoax.

Half an hour later, while Auburn was having lunch in the can-

teen, the man with the videotape called again from a different phone booth.

"Here's the deal," he explained. "My girlfriend is one of the waitresses at Weyermueller's. She sneaked me up on the balcony last night so I could tape the show. You're not supposed to, but I wasn't going to sell it or anything, just maybe show it to a couple friends. I don't want to get in any trouble or anything over this, and I don't want her to lose her job either." Auburn suspected that this latter development might turn off the caller's principal source of support.

By the exercise of considerable diplomacy, he got the caller to identify himself as Jerry Prentice and arranged for him to bring his tape to headquarters for a private viewing. Prentice was thirty-something with a beer belly and a mane of unkempt hair spewing out from under a cap advertising ball bearings. Auburn had set up a portable videotape player in his office where, abiding by his promise, he sat down alone with Prentice to view the tape.

As Prentice had said, the whole thing had been shot from the gallery overlooking the main dining room. Not only was the sound quality of Prentice's camcorder abominable, but he was a most inexpert cameraman. It wasn't his fault that the human figures on the main level were foreshortened by the high angle of view, but the camcorder seldom remained stationary, and abrupt panning shots occurred frequently and inexplicably.

When the tape began, the serving staff was still distributing soup and salad. During the two or three minutes before the show started, the camera showed undue interest in one particular waitress. Morgan Carruth also appeared from time to time, gliding among the tables with a bowl in each hand and two more deftly balanced along her left forearm. And there sat Dr. Mickelhaws, stiff as a scarecrow in his ringside seat.

The program began with an eerie flourish of organ music and a violent electrical storm created by sound and lighting effects. Auburn recognized the voice of the narrator, with its denture lisp, as that of Bish Gardner. It took a little longer for him to identify the actress playing Gloria DeVoyd, kittenish and featherbrained in a blond wig, as Julia Westgaard. His first impression of Desmond Cossegrin was also entirely different from what he expected. Lord Anthony stalked among the tables like a hungry wolf, delivering his inane lines in a husky tenor voice with a phony Eastern European accent.

After the first act, which ran for about twenty minutes, Prentice had turned off the camcorder until the main course of the meal was over. The second act began with more raucous music and

more strobe light effects. As Cossegrin poured out the fake champagne, Auburn found the suspense of watching this real-life murder drama unfold almost intolerable. It stood his hair on end to realize that that boisterous clown was about to be murdered before his eyes.

Lord Anthony's death scene began, as Gardner had said, as pure slapstick. Cossegrin was hamming it up with a vigor that no dying man could have mustered. After he sank to the floor, while Julia Westgaard was still on the far side of the banqueting table, a dim figure, dressed entirely in black, suddenly crawled crab-fashion across the floor toward him. The figure was probably invisible to everyone on the main level, except perhaps Cossegrin himself. Even from the vantage point of the gallery, much of what was going on was concealed or distorted by the strobe light. The shadowy form moved its right hand swiftly back and forth a few times, as if wiping condensed moisture from a window, and then closed in on Cossegrin, bending close over him before fading away again.

Cossegrin's death struggles started looking more authentic, his gasps and gurgles more desperate. The wraiths sent up a wail and began their mournful procession. Dr. Mickelhaws got into the act briefly before being bulldozed into the wings by Ms. Carruth. Then all hell broke loose. At this point Prentice had turned off his camcorder and vacated the premises.

Auburn ran the last five minutes of the tape over again three times. "Have you ever seen this play all the way through?" he asked Prentice.

"I tried to tape it about six weeks ago, but it didn't turn out."

"Tell me how it's supposed to end."

At Sounds Great, the audio and electronics store in Willoughby Mall, Bish Gardner had just finished writing up a big sale. But the smile of satisfaction melted from his homely features as soon as he saw Auburn.

"Hi, Officer. Making any progress?"

"Some. You didn't tell me about the fake body under the table last night."

"Hey, a magician doesn't give away all his secrets. I told you about the fake champagne."

"The fake champagne wasn't where the poison was. Could you run through the end of the play for me? Describe what happens after Lord Anthony dies?"

"Sure. Come on back here." Gardner led him to a stuffy, cluttered office and made room for him on a chair next to the desk.

"The tables around the stage area have floor-length tablecloths. The gimmick is that under the table where the cast eats there's a dummy dressed and made up to look like Lord Anthony. After he does his death scene, while he's down there between the tables where nobody can see him, he pulls the dummy out from under the table and crawls under the table himself." Again Gardner was illustrating his narration with a constant stream of fluid gesticulation. "Then Igor and the wraiths bring in a coffin and put the dummy in it. With the strobe light going, nobody can tell it isn't the real Lord Anthony. They put the coffin on the table and screw down the lid.

"There's a female wig and a gown under the table, and while all that's going on, Lord Anthony puts those on and slips out on the other side of the table. He's pretty well hidden by the production booth, but if any of the guests happens to notice him out of the corner of their eye, they figure he's one of the wraiths. Then he goes into the kitchen, takes off the gown and wig, and just as all the lights come back on he makes a grand entrance as the mysteriously resurrected Lord Anthony."

"When you put away the props and costumes last night, were the wig and gown still under the table with the dummy?"

Gardner's gaunt, slouching form straightened like a snapped whip. "No, they weren't," he said. "Last night was such a mess I never even thought about it at the time, but now that you mention it, I didn't find that gown or wig anywhere."

On his way back to headquarters, Auburn sorted out the implications of this latest information. He now understood why, during one brief moment near the end of the tape, four wraiths were visible instead of only three. But since Cossegrin was also still in view, and moribund at that, that fourth wraith had to be the murderer. Gardner and Brad Benediktus alibied each other for the time of the murder, and so did the two actresses who had been in Weyermueller's office touching up their makeup.

Could the murderer have been somebody from outside who slipped in unnoticed during the program? Weyermueller evidently didn't run a very tight ship. Auburn had found the alley door, by which he had made his own escape to evade the TV crews, ajar and unattended. Jerry Prentice seemingly had the run of the kitchen and had twice gained access to the gallery with his camcorder. But whoever had written himself into the script of *The Brides of Dunraven Castle* must have known that script perfectly.

That evening Auburn had a dinner date with Rochelle Harris at the Dockside Restaurant. From their window table they had a view of the river, where reflections of the lights on the opposite

bank glowed fuzzily through the autumn fog and murk. The marine decor inside the restaurant was as phony as Monopoly money, and their server suffered from defective vision, being able to see African-American couples only intermittently, briefly, and indistinctly. But the seafood was the best in town.

On principle Auburn avoided discussing criminal investigations in progress, but eventually he got around to asking Rochelle, who was a professional art therapist, a question relevant to the Cossegrin murder. "Have you ever heard of a psychologist named Fiona Cremner-Bate?"

"Um-hmm." She threw him a whimsical glance. "Were you thinking of going to her for help?"

"Maybe. Not the kind of help you mean."

"Good. Can I tell you something unofficially? Off the record?"

"Anything you say will be taken down in writing and immediately run through a shredder."

"Fiona Cremner-Bate has a bad rep in the psych community."

"What kind of a bad rep?"

"I guess it's really no secret. She persuades all her clients that they were mistreated as children, usually by their parents, and that that's why they have emotional problems in adulthood. Her standard gimmick is to take some phobia or recurring dream and fabricate an interpretation that fits the scenario she's trying to push."

"Fabricate? Why would a health professional pull such a rotten trick? And how can she get away with it?"

Rochelle swallowed more gracefully than a swan. "Why do some so-called doctors tell all their patients their troubles are due to a difference in the lengths of their legs? And how do they get away with that?"

Next morning, Auburn tried to reach Fiona Cremner-Bate by phone but got an answering machine. After watching the end of Jerry Prentice's tape twice more, he headed across town to the offices of Hobart-Royale, the telemarketing firm where Dewey Cossegrin worked. The business occupied an entire floor of the Bossart Tower. Dozens of marketers wearing telephone headsets were working in what looked like a gigantic beehive, each ensconced in a tiny, stark cubicle equipped with a computer.

Auburn talked with a supervisor, a motherly but businesslike woman named Joyce Saunders. Ms. Saunders had heard the name Cossegrin on the news but didn't recognize it as that of someone on her payroll.

"Most of our staff work only part-time," she explained, "and we have a tremendous turnover. A lot of them are college kids. They need a few bucks, they make a few bucks, and they're gone."

"Could you verify for me that Dewey Cossegrin was working here Tuesday evening? And what hours he worked?"

She led him past row after row of cubicles to a time clock with the usual wall-mounted racks on either side, one containing the cards of people who were clocked in and the other the cards of people who were clocked out.

"Cossegrin, you said, with a C? Here we are."

"Just a minute, ma'am. Please don't touch it."

Auburn used a pocket forceps to extract the card from the rack and slip it into a borrowed envelope. "I'll give you a receipt for this and get the original back here to you in a day or two."

"I hope so. Otherwise Mr. Cossegrin won't get paid on time."

"Who handles these cards besides the workers when they check in and out?"

"Just me. I put them out every Monday morning and collect them the following Monday."

"Have you ever been fingerprinted by the local Public Safety Department?"

She swallowed. "I had to be fingerprinted two or three years ago in order to be bonded as treasurer of my alumni association. I'm not in some kind of trouble, am I?"

"Do you mind if I check these racks for a few more names?"

On his return to headquarters Auburn took the time card directly to the forensic lab and turned it over to Kestrel, along with full identifying data on Joyce Saunders, the supervisor at Hobart-Royale. Fiona Cremner-Bate hadn't yet responded to his call, so he left another message.

Then he got out his list of local firms that handled industrial chemicals or had equipment for filling pressurized gas cylinders. He called eighteen numbers before he found a business where the name he was seeking rang a bell.

Meanwhile, Kestrel had identified some of the fingerprints on the time card as those of an alien named Achmed Boiduk who had been arrested just a few weeks earlier for speeding in a school zone and driving without a license. Auburn was lucky enough to find Boiduk at the apartment he shared with three compatriots, all engineering students. After putting up a brief show of resistance, Boiduk became extremely cooperative and agreed to accompany Auburn to headquarters to make a statement.

Auburn conferred briefly with his immediate superior, Lieutenant Savage, before making the trip across the street to the courthouse. Equipped with an arrest warrant and accompanied by Patrolman Dollinger, he arrived at the Cossegrin home a little before one P.M.

Dewey answered the doorbell. "My mother is lying down," he informed them, "and I doubt that you can give me one good reason why I should even tell her you're here."

"I'm not so sure of that. But you're the one we need to talk to. Can we come in?"

Dewey stepped back into the entry hall and motioned for them to enter with mock politeness. He didn't invite them to sit down.

"The person who killed your stepfather," Auburn told him, "gave him a fatal dose of cyanide gas while he was acting out Lord Anthony's death scene. Since we can account for the whereabouts of all the people in the cast at that moment, the killer must have been somebody else who knew both the script and the layout of the restaurant. According to Bish Gardner, you played the part of Igor in some of the shows last year."

Cossegrin threw back his head and stuck out his chin. "Under the law of the land," he said, "you can't arrest me or charge me unless you have some kind of proof of wrongdoing. I know I'm not telling you something you don't know. I just want to make sure you're aware that I know it too."

"You work at Hockaday Tool Rental," continued Auburn, paying no attention to the interruption, "where they rent propane-operated lift trucks and where you have access to equipment for refilling bottled gas cylinders."

"I was at my other job at Hobart-Royale when my stepfather was killed. You can easily verify that if you check their records."

Auburn shook his head. "That's not going to work. I've already talked to Achmed, your buddy with the student visa and the scholarship, who isn't permitted to be gainfully employed in this country. He tells me that sometimes you let him clock in on your card at Hobart-Royale when you don't feel like working. You probably figured he'd keep quiet about doing that Tuesday night so he wouldn't get himself in trouble. But he didn't hold out for long when he found out he could be charged as an accessory to murder."

"What murder?"

"Don't play games, Dewey. The murder of your stepfather, Desmond Cossegrin." Auburn read him his rights.

Dewey might be maladjusted, but he was far from stupid. His specious show of defiance and self-assurance evaporated like mist.

"We always hated each other," he said. "After he married my mother, I was just in his way."

"He adopted you," observed Auburn. "Gave you his name."

"That's because he was a power freak. When I was eight, he tried to smother me with a pillow while I was asleep. He did it half a dozen times, but I always woke up. That's why I have asthma." He

emitted a couple of wheezy coughs, as if that explained everything and even justified cold-blooded murder. "And when the weather is like this . . ." He took an inhaler out of his pocket and shook it with a back-and-forth movement of the wrist—exactly as the killer on the tape had done before lethally gassing Desmond Cossegrin.

Before he could put it into his mouth, Auburn lunged for it with both hands. "Sit on him, Fritz!" he told Dollinger. "And hold your breath till I get this thing away from him."

On the following Tuesday, Auburn and Rochelle Harris had dinner at Weyermueller's, where the theatrical performances had been suspended indefinitely.

"So the kid almost did himself in?"

"And us too, maybe." Now that Dewey Cossegrin was behind bars and the news media were in full possession of the facts, Auburn could speak freely about the case. "There was enough cyanide in that canister to wipe out the College of Cardinals. Which was actually kind of fortunate, because it means that the bruises Dollinger put on him were in self-defense and not from the use of undue force in making the arrest."

"Maybe," said Rochelle, "it would have been just as well if the poor kid had managed to remove himself from earthly jurisdiction."

"No way. Because we get paid to see justice done, and the 'poor kid' is the only one of Cossegrin's killers that we can take to court."

"Killers? Who else—?"

"Well, that off-duty EMT was partly responsible for his death by breaking his ribs, tearing up his insides; and delaying proper medical intervention. And your friend the shrink is even more responsible if she got his stepson stirred up enough to murder him."

"She's not my friend," objected Rochelle. "And there isn't any doubt in my mind that she turned the kid against his stepfather. Like I told you, that's what she does best. Have you seen her Web page?"

"Never thought to look for one."

"Well, take a look, and see if her picture doesn't remind you of Godzilla with a migraine. But you're going to see her in person one of these days because the kid's lawyer will put her on the stand and try some kind of insanity plea."

"I never thought of that either. I wish there were some way the city prosecutor could discredit her testimony. Any ideas?"

"Off the record—unofficially? Still got that shredder handy?"

A LESSON FROM PURPLE

ANN WOODWARD

It was a night of imperfect moon and suddenly shifting wind just past the middle of the Fourth Month, a night of warm but unsettled spring exuberance. Clouds, which seemed all the blacker for the light behind them, were edged with golden dazzle and blew raggedly across the brilliant glow. It was not an apt time for sitting in the moon-viewing pavilion. Yet that was where he was taken when he arrived, led by a nervous maid. He was still in rough clothes because when he received her message he was out in the hills north of the city, on a hunting expedition with his friends. He heard the way his feet boomed on the long walkway of planks across the garden pond. He could have walked more patiently, but he did not change the intemperate pace of his steps.

He was a prince whose older brother had long ago become emperor. Officially, he lived in an extensive apartment in the palace, though there were three houses in the city where he was welcomed as husband. Though not usual, it was common in his time and in his culture for men to have more than one wife, and he supported all these households as well as several unofficial residences of women he favored. The third wife was still very young and lived with her parents, and the relationship had been official for only months; the second was a mild and charming woman who made no demands and was never critical, but she also very seldom had anything interesting to say; the first and most honored in the eyes of his society was the princess served by Lady Aoi as lady-in-waiting. Her father, who headed the government, was an unusually able man from outside the prominent family that supplied almost all ministers and important officials. She it was who could never be happy enough to see him that she forgot the slights and insults she always charged him with, who was likely to absent herself without telling him and stay away for weeks, who could be sarcastic one minute and sweetly agreeable the next, whose passion in both loving and in tirade engaged his

mind, his heart, and his raging anger.

She heard the loud thumping steps, and she thought at once that she had made a mistake. Her tight breathing choked her even more, and she drew herself small behind an opened fan. Her chest hurt, her ribs gripped hard.

At first he could not find her, she sat in such deep shadow. "You say you are ill again?" he said, regretting the abruptness and harsh tone but helpless to disguise his feelings.

Her reply was too faint to hear.

"Have you any idea of the darkness of the track through rocks and woods I have had to travel to get here?"

Again only a murmur from the shadowed corner, though he thought she had said something about the young wife. He could not have denied that he was spending most of his time with the beautiful daughter of the Minister of the Imperial Household, but he did not know how this wife always knew so much.

He turned his back, breathed in, threw away his riding crop, and mastered himself.

"You—" Another deep breath. "I honor you as my principal wife, and when you send for me, I come."

"This time, at least, from the company of men."

"Must we argue? When you are ill? What is it?" He had choked off the "this time," and finally, he approached her and sat on the bare floorboards. A dash of wind stirred waves and splashing underneath them. Dancing points of reflection dipped and swung across the pond. He could see in the dimness that she sat with her face turned away.

"Are you sure you care to know how I am feeling?"

"After the trip I have had, I very much do." He softened his tone, and he leaned toward her. She dipped her head lower behind the fan but turned more to face him.

"It is a fullness of the throat. I came out here because I couldn't breathe in the house. I am afraid. I feel that I might die."

"Well, let's see. It could be an excess of yang and that, in the throat, is choler. Or extreme yin and that could be tears. What was it before, when you had the twinge in your side?"

"Ache, it was an ache."

"Yes. And Lady Aoi said it was . . . too little liquid in the system. Could this be another phase of the same trouble? Let us send for wine, it was wine that helped you then." He signaled the maid, who hovered just outside hearing, and she rushed off.

The princess sat up straighter, leaning into the light, which came and went as moving clouds hid and uncovered the moon. "Do you

remember that night?" she said in a stronger voice. "We had cups and cups of wine."

"Cups and cups," he said, "and you felt wonderfully well afterward. But why don't we send for your companion. She always has good advice."

"If you like," she said, the tone cold.

Lady Aoi at just that time was sitting next to her lowered blind, listening to a visitor she could barely see through the thin reed slats who sat on the veranda outside. He was a young man in the uniform of the palace guards, and she knew him from a trip into the country the previous fall, when he had served among her escorts. He had come to complain of his father and to ask a favor.

"Could you please speak to your uncle for me? I will not work in that ministry, I will not let my father force me into a life I would find intolerable."

"It is not your father who forces but simple family tradition. No one of your birth has ever served in a provincial army."

"I would not be in the army, I would be a warrior for your uncle. I like that life, riding all day, shooting arrows at targets from horseback, living in the open air among men who are active, who do not mind if their clothes become dirty."

"And sometimes fighting, raiding neighboring farms, wrecking crops, killing children. Will you like that?"

"It will not be that way, your uncle is a just man. But I will be good at whatever he asks me to do, and I will be loyal."

"Hmm."

"I think that serving in a ministry, dictating orders to be copied, writing reports, meeting and discussing—"

"—will kill you. I know, you said that."

"I don't think that you understand how desperate I am. I will do anything!"

Aoi sighed to hear the classic cry of the adolescent in rebellion.

"Your uncle has no sons, I understand. Perhaps I will let him adopt me. I would not come without assets."

"You have your own income?"

"I have the intangible asset of my birth. Though I took your uncle's name, I would still be . . ."

"I see. A nice inconsistency. You would repudiate your family yet depend on its reputation and standing."

Just then two things happened: thunder quite close and the arrival of the maid. Aoi could not at first understand what the message was. The wind howled, the blind blew into the room, rat-

ting and slatting from side to side, and her visitor was saying his final pleas and some hurried politenesses of parting.

"The prince is here?" Aoi said to the maid, and to the young man, "Yes, yes, I will see what I can do," regretting it the next instant because she had no wish to rouse the enmity of the boy's father. "Are they still out there?" she said to the maid, and "Such a sudden storm!" as the prince and his wife arrived in haste, just ahead of gardeners with the rain shutters. Hurrying footsteps raced along the veranda in the wrong direction for the main gate.

"Who was that?" asked the princess.

"A departing visitor."

"He won't get out that way."

"He will soon see his mistake."

The roar of arriving rain ended the conversation. When the room was secured, a brazier brought to warm the suddenly chill air, and hot wine on the way, the prince turned to Aoi. "I have just been with the Minister of the Treasury. We were up in the hills when I got my wife's mess—"

"But listen to you!" the princess ground out between tight jaws. "Wasn't it to consult about *me* that you wanted Lady Aoi?"

Aoi glanced at her, seeing the sudden turn of her head as the princess recognized that Lady Aoi would not be deceived any more than the prince was by this sad bid for his attention. Desperately ashamed and unhappy, the princess drew up the edge of one sleeve to hide her face.

Aoi moved to her side, heard in murmurs what the complaint was, listened as the princess whispered that indeed she now felt more ill than ever, that she was choking and hot and afraid of dying. Aoi agreed that, like last time, wine would be just the thing. She busied herself speaking with the maid and then rearranging the glowing slices of charcoal in the brazier with long bronze fire chopsticks. It would not do to let the princess see that Aoi recognized deception and deplored it.

Only when he was leaving for his private room did the prince ask Aoi about the son of the Minister of the Treasury, as he had begun to do before.

"They say you know him."

"Yes. He was just here, it was he who dashed off in the wrong direction. You will remember that he was one of my guards when I went . . ."

"Oh yes. Well, his father is recommending him for the new office I am to head. He says the boy is quite good at figures."

"Um. I wonder, really, how his father knows anything about him. The mother died when his brother was born, then the brother

died, and he was raised by an old woman who has served that family for a long time. Then he lived with his tutor until he went into the guards. He is just barely old enough for that."

"The tutor says—"

"Yes, and it is probably true. But he has never lived in his father's house, and they do not know each other at all. He resents his father's control, he has no idea of the life of a government man, and he is frightened of . . . everything."

"Ah. But a son of that house must go into the government, surely he has always known that."

"Yes, but he says he will not, and he has asked me to place him with my uncle in Bizen Province."

"He would lose his hereditary income and have no resources at all. Relatives would not dare to help him."

"I know. He says he won't care, that he has resources, by which he means just that name he intends to give up, and that if he goes to the country my uncle will take care of him. I do not like to ask this. I must think carefully."

As she turned, Aoi caught the desolate glance of the princess, left alone with her fullness of the throat and intently pulling apart the hem of her sleeve.

Several days later the peace of a sunny mid morning was riven by a scream. Everyone dashed toward the sound and found the princess on her knees beside her document chest, scrolls, books, and long narrow boxes spread across the floor.

"Someone has taken the most valuable thing I possess!" she cried, fluttering her fingers in the air, as if she thought to settle finally on the proper box, if only she could lay her hand on it.

"The fan of the Old Emperor?" Aoi breathed. Everyone in the city knew of this treasure, which had been a special gift from her father when she left his mansion to live in her own house as a married woman. It was impossibly ancient, with a signed poem on fragile painted paper and a speckled bamboo frame. It had come down in the family of the princess's father for thirteen generations and was shown only at the New Year, and then only to those whose families owned articles of equal antiquity and value.

"That boy!" the princess said. "He was running away the night of the storm, running directly into the house!"

Aoi suppressed her protests, unable to justify her belief that the boy was not a thief. Firm ideas about the character of a very young man would not be welcome.

The prince came and managed to get the accusation against the boy confined within the house, sternly warning the servants, who

understood that discretion was always required of them. No one had seen the young man inside, but the princess reminded them that the boy had been running back into the house that night. She insisted that with the storm he could have entered, and that a fine big lacquered chest was the first place he would look. It was just bad luck that the wooden box his hand fell on was the one containing an ancient royal fan. Aoi thought of how the boy had said that he would have resources, and she could see that the prince also remembered that boast, but neither one mentioned it to the princess.

Very discreetly, the prince made inquiries and found that, indeed, this son of a minister had been recently unstable, disrespectful to his father and threatening to leave the family and offer himself for adoption to a man who had no sons. The boy himself, because of his prominent father, was not approached. He continued his service at the palace. Investigations there confirmed that he showed no change of manner and had not missed reporting as expected, that he was indeed young, but that he adapted quickly, and that there were no complaints against him.

One of the secretaries from the palace moved among known collectors and was not told of any item of extreme value offered to them recently. The collectors, however, perked up their ears and wondered what might be coming on the market soon.

Days passed. The princess spoke by turns with apathy, scorn, bitterness, impatience, fear. The prince, since the night of the storm, lived in her house and tried to console her, while refusing to believe that the thief was the son of an old friend. This attitude did not make the princess as angry and despairing as Aoi thought it would have in other times. Their manner to each other was never of even temper, rocketing from storm to indifference to peace and back around again. For now, all expression of feeling seemed to be in abeyance and there was an uneasy truce.

Aoi became very thoughtful. She suggested to the prince that he needed a new summer robe and that the dying and cutting should begin soon, so as to have it ready by the time of hot weather.

On a day that was warm and breezy, Aoi suggested to the princess that they do the dying. The fullness of throat that had troubled her was no longer mentioned, and grieving for her lost treasure, combined with fear of what her father would say when told that it was gone, made full occupation for the princess. She sat straighter, making motions of negation. "No, no. I don't feel like it now. Surely you understand that I can't . . ."

"It will do you good to be busy. I have already sent for the dyer,"

Aoi said, and she moved to the closet where a large wicker box of silk was kept, white bolts of uniform length and width. Lifting it down, she removed the lid and sat looking at the bounty of undyed cloth.

The princess snatched the lid and tried to replace it. But Aoi, unperturbed, laid her hand on the top rolls and looked at her mistress. "It is odd," she said, "how life seems to be a series of realizations. Truths tend to pile up as we grow and age, don't you find it so?"

"Truths?"

"Yes, little revelations, sometimes simple withholdings. As when a smile is intercepted and we think, 'Ah, so that is the way it is with that man and that woman,' and yet, knowing this secret, we say nothing to others. Or when we suddenly learn to stop talking and listen, or that the best thing to do is often nothing and that we should just get out of the way and let events proceed to their conclusion. It is in this way that our character is developed. It seems that we mature through little negatives of removing faults and ignorances. Haven't you found it so?"

The princess gazed blankly at Aoi, then stirred again to take the box lid. But Aoi, unnoticing, kept her hand on the silk bolts and continued her musing. "Even in such a simple thing as dying, one learns broader lessons. I remember the time I wanted purple. I chose a color I thought would be perfect. But the dyer refused. She shook her head, 'No, no. You won't like it that way.'"

"What way?" The princess could not help her interest in Aoi's oblique observations.

"Why, just that simple color. 'You won't like it unless you add some brown,' she said."

The princess could only peer in puzzlement at Aoi.

"Think about it," Aoi said. "The color will please only if it is deepened, enriched, and restrained. One of life's little lessons." She picked up the top bolt, a smooth weave, too close and dense to be cool. Glancing at the princess, she said, "Shall we look for a more suitable cloth?"

Ashen in the face and with a frozen expression of apprehension, the princess could not answer.

"Ah, well," said Aoi, looking away in pity, "Perhaps it is not a good day after all. I will tell them to send the dyer away." She took the box lid from limp fingers and pressed it firmly back onto its bottom counterpart. "One must please oneself, after all," she added in an off-hand voice, "and if we don't choose to dye cloth today . . ." As was the custom, an obvious thought was left unfinished.



Next day, the princess sent her husband back to his quarters at the palace, assuring him that she felt well and even thanking him for his patience. "But please, not a word to my father. The fan may yet turn up."

"Ah, do you think so?" asked her husband. "And why may I not stay with you, now that you are so much . . . better?"

"Go and come back later. You have your new office to establish and assistants to find. They will think you are not serious."

Never had she sent him away when he wanted to stay. He was intrigued and thought to impose his will. Aoi gave him a silent signal and he left.

For two days the princess kept to her room, sending back the food trays, refusing wine, and asking Aoi to make tea for her because it was said to be a medicine that fostered meditation. Aoi obliged.

On the third day, the fan reappeared. Aoi was shown where it had been found, fallen behind a pile of floor cushions that were put away for the summer in the same closet where the fan was kept in the lacquered chest.

"How could it have gotten there?" the princess said.

Aoi smiled. Now the box of cloth could be investigated for a bolt of loosely woven silk, now that one abnormally fat bolt would not be discovered under all the rest. A long thin fan box would just fit inside a rerolled bolt of silk.

Out of long habit, Aoi condensed the situation into poetry.

Can a wise dyer
Who knows to add brown for depth
Be the one to teach
Restraint? Or is the lesson
Of purple too dark, too rich?

Sometimes Aoi found herself weary of women. She longed for the princess's father, for his company and his conversation, for his firm regard, his constancy, his wit and calm intelligence. She was in the habit of sharing with him her observations of life, but she knew that she could not tell him of the lesson his daughter had mastered. She knew also that lessons have a way of being forgotten. She sighed and hoped that the prince would soon return and take advantage of a space of tolerance and calm.

As for the boy, Aoi decided that she would not help him in his rebellion. He had many lessons to learn, and the first must surely be to rely on his own strength. ♫

DYING WORDS



ACROSTIC BY ARLENE FISHER

For instructions on how to solve the acrostic puzzle, turn to page 127. The solution to the puzzle will appear in the January/February issue.

DEFINITIONS

WORDS

A. Move stealthily

41 87 150 37 192 105

B. Most indigent

23 75 116 18 58 102 181 24

C. Of one of the five senses

161 72 77 82 189 152 164 124 170

D. Supple

143 60 137 153 48

E. "We the Living"
author: 2 wds.

120 175 130 43 17 6 95

F. Sharp-billed bird

184 136 27 66 90 3 119 101

G. Make club soda, say

176 84 174 106 46 142

H. Kin of drupes

70 19 118 13 64 154 51

I. Impromptu: 3 wds.
(slang)

2 33 110 11 138 49 38 180 55 162

J. In progress

133 177 165 39 97 63 61 71

K. Uses a flail

94 126 103 122 10 141 173 185

L. Rank below
ambassador

50 34 74 131 128 85 69 20

M. In the chips

52 187 112 89 158 16 168 31

N. Diminutive, in a way

107 29 145 178 44

O. Forest bane: 2 wds.

100 32 144 179 9 78 76 113 148

P. Variety of beryl

156 132 96 79 8 149 35 191 1 166

MORE THAN ONE KIND OF MEAN

ERNEST B. AND ALICE A. BROWN

“Rodeo Drive East.” That’s what the tour guides and guide-books think it’s cute to call the eight blocks of Newbury Street between the Ritz-Carlton and Capital Grille. But that’s okay. We dyed-in-the-wool Bostonians know that Rodeo Drive is really “Newbury Street West.”

Jammed with tourists and throngs of bustling shoppers, this mile-long mecca of swanky shops and posh restaurants is the last place on earth you’d expect to find a working private detective. It’s a half century and three thousand miles, another whole world, away from Marlowe’s “mean streets.” Then again, there’s more than one kind of mean.

I was standing outside the display window of one of the street’s classier shoe stores, nose practically pressed to the glass, coveting a really kick-ass pair of stacked heel knee-highs in soft black leather, when the pager my brand new employers had given me beeped. I dug it out of my bag, checked the display, and mumbled something indecent under my breath. It was the Chic Boutique, the store at the opposite end of my little protectorate, and a full block away. I stuffed the pager back in my bag and, dodging pedestrians like a swivel-hipped broken-field runner, made a dash for the far end of the block.

The three shoplifting-plagued merchants on this block who had hired me could have hired an off-duty BPD uniformed detail for about the same money, but they were afraid a cop marching up and down in front of their stores would not fit the affable image of Newbury Street. And none of the three was willing to spring for the cost of any sort of full-time in-store surveillance—electronic, warm blooded, or otherwise—so they’d come up with the bright idea to share the expense of hiring a private investigator to cover all three shops as a sort of communal, roving store detective.

They thought a woman wandering from store to store would draw far less attention than some guy lurking around behind the



clothes racks. Sexist? Sure, but true nonetheless. To that end, they'd gone down through the listings for investigators in the Boston phone book from "Amalgamated Investigations" to "V. Dymond, Private Investigator," before they found a female operative whose rates fit their budget. Valerie Dymond—that would be yours truly—licensed, bonded, and fully insured. Ever vigilant. Shoplifters beware.

I had sprinted to within ten yards of the Chic Boutique when a woman bolted out through the door of the shop, and the sharp bang of a gunshot from inside the store echoed off the buildings on the other side of the street. In her mad dash, the woman careened off a couple of middle-aged tourists and sent them sprawling in a tangle of baggy blue jeans and orthotic sneakers. She veered out into the street, yanked open the door of a silver Mercedes, slid in behind the wheel, and streaked away from the curb, leaving the stench of burning rubber and a cloud of white smoke in the air.

I fished the little camera phone out of my bag as I ran, flipped it open as I darted out between two parked cars into the street, and hit the zoom button just as the driver of the delivery truck I had stepped out in front of stood on his brakes and leaned on the horn. I could hear the thud of packages as they flew off shelves in the truck and tumbled around on the floor, but I got a shot of the tail end of the fleeing Mercedes and, with a little luck, the numbers on the license plate.

I gave the brown-clad truck driver what I hoped was a sweet smile of conciliation, stepped back up onto the sidewalk, and shouldered my way through the crowd that was gathering around the boutique's entrance door.

I stopped just inside the doorway and stood staring at the shiny leather soles of Earl Peterson's wingtips, slightly splayed and pointed toward the ceiling. Lying there face up with his arms flung out to the side, the Chic Boutique's manager seemed to be floating on his back on the shop's sea green carpet. His conservative gray suit coat was unbuttoned, and a splotch of blood the size of a dinner plate on his white shirt shone wetly with the reflection of the overhead lights. I went in, bent down over Peterson's body, and felt the side of his neck for a pulse. There was none.

Dan Bittamann, the only other person working in the store that day, was standing in the doorway to the stockroom at the back of the shop with a cell phone in his hand. He was slack jawed and pale, and had the wide-eyed stare of a person in shock.

"You okay?" I asked him. "Are you hurt?"

No answer. Just the open-mouthed, million-mile stare.

I went over and gave his shoulder a gentle shake. "Hey, Dan, you okay?"

His eyes finally focused. He bobbed his head. "Yeah, I'm okay."

"You call 911?" I asked.

He nodded again and jerked his head back toward the stockroom. "Just hung up; used the phone in the back room."

He took a couple of tentative steps toward Peterson's body. "Is he, is he . . . uh?"

"Yes," I said. "He's dead. What happened?"

He just stood there transfixed, staring down at the body.

"Dan"—a little louder this time—"what happened? Who shot him?"

He looked up at me and frowned, as though he'd never seen me before. "She had a gun."

"Who? Who had a gun?"

"A customer that was in here just now."

"You mean the woman who ran out the door a minute ago?"

He nodded.

"She just walked in and shot him?"

"No. She was over there—" He turned and pointed off to the left to a display of costume jewelry hanging on a rack against the wall. "—looking at a necklace. She kept that one in one hand, reached up, and took another one off the rack. So while she's holding *that* one out, you know, like she's admiring it, she drops the one in her other hand into this big shoulder bag she's got."

"You actually saw her cop the necklace?"

He nodded again. "I was just coming out of the back room onto the floor. Earl was up front there at the register, and I guess he saw it too, 'cause he yanked out his cell phone and started punching in numbers."

"Yeah," I said, "he was beeping me. Then what?"

"She snaps her head around, sees Earl glaring at her with the phone in his hand, and takes off running for the door. But Earl comes flying out from behind the counter, steps in front of her, puts his hand out to stop her, and . . ."

"Go on, and what?"

He furrowed his brow and looked down at the floor. "She had a gun in her bag. She took it out and shot him and ran out the door."

I heard the wail of sirens in the distance.

Dan heard them too. He glanced up toward the front of the store, then looked down again at Earl Peterson's body. "Well," he said, "he won't be calling me 'Danielle' anymore."

An odd remark, I thought, even from someone in shock.



"You sure this is the car?" Sergeant Lenihan was holding my cell phone out to me with the shot of the fleeing Mercedes on the display. "The car you say the woman took off in?"

Sergeant Detective Lenihan looked like a worn-out beat cop somebody had stuffed into a gray, ill-fitting, summer-weight suit, a wilted blue button-down shirt, and a wrinkled, coffee-stained red tie. He was one of the two responding detectives from the Area G, District 2 station on Appleton Ave.

I glanced at the phone and nodded. "Uh-huh, that's it. They having trouble tracing the owner?"

"Oh, they had no trouble finding the owner," he said, "but I'll bet you're gonna wish they hadn't." He cupped my elbow in a hand the size of a catcher's mitt and guided me toward the front of the store. "Come on, they want me to bring you back to the shop."

"The station? How come? And who do you mean *they*?"

"The captain and someone he's got there he says wants to talk to you."

So far the day had been a category five disaster. And I had a feeling it was headed nowhere but downhill from there.

After Dan had called 911, the first two uniforms to arrive on the scene—sirens wailing, lights flashing—slewed their cruisers up onto the sidewalk, barged through the front door with guns drawn, and made Dan and me "assume the position" against the wall. They took our IDs and, after I'd explained the situation and showed them the digital shot of the fleeing Mercedes, appropriated my cell phone too.

When the detectives finally arrived, Lenihan, waving his arms and issuing orders, took possession of our IDs, my cell phone, *and* the compact Beretta I carry in my shoulder bag. A cursory inspection of the fully loaded pistol and a sniff of the barrel would have told the greenest rookie that it hadn't been fired since there was a Democrat in the White House, but Lenihan had it bagged and tagged as possible evidence anyway.

They had my ID, my phone, and my gun.

"If you confiscate much more," I'd told Lenihan, "I'll be standing here in my sneak-sneaks and undies."

The hard look he'd given me suggested that the only thing the good sergeant might dislike more than a witness cracking wise was a wisecracking lady P.I.

"You say they hired you to protect them from shoplifters, huh?" Captain Torres was sitting at his desk, looking at a freshly printed crime scene photo of Earl Peterson's body. He tapped the photo

three or four times with a nicely manicured finger. "Looks to me like you blew that job big time, Dymond."

Seated in a caramel-colored leather chair beside the captain's desk, the third person in the glass-walled corner office was a trim and well-tanned gentleman of middle age, wearing a hundred-dollar haircut and a thousand-dollar suit. His demeanor whispered heavy hitter. His attitude screamed lawyer. He was The Honorable Senator William Winthrop Wellington's personal attorney. The Mercedes I'd captured with my camera phone was registered to the senator. It was his wife's car.

The lawyer slid a printout of my shot of the fleeing Mercedes across the desk in front of me. "Given the confusion you've described," he said, "gunshots, people falling down on the sidewalk, your galloping out into the street to take this photo, how can you be so certain that this is the car the woman you *claim* you saw running from the store got into? Or for that matter, that it was even a woman?"

I didn't even bother trying to answer that one. I just shook my head. Lawyers and their "damned-if-you-do, damned-if-you-don't" questions. Some combination of the Socratic method and Johnnie Cochran.

Through the glass partition over the lawyer's shoulder, the squad room was buzzing with activity.

Lenihan, doing a two-fingered hunt-and-peck on the keyboard of a small-screened computer that may have been an antique, was taking a statement from Daniel Bittamann.

Two desks over, Lenihan's partner, who looked a bit more proficient on the keys, was interviewing the elderly couple who had been knocked to the sidewalk outside the boutique.

On the far side of the railing that separated the squad room from the waiting area, three more witnesses, in varying pantomimes of impatience, were pointing at their watches as they complained to a third plainclothes detective.

A fourth detective was trying to separate two men who were jabbing fingers at each other and shouting loudly enough to make Lenihan look up from his struggle with the keyboard. He got up from his desk and went out through the gate to help pry them apart and get them settled down on opposite ends of a long wooden bench.

Impatient with my silence, the senator's attorney said, "We are waiting for your answer, Ms. Dymond."

"It'll be the same as the answer I gave you the last two times you asked the question, Counselor. I'm certain the person who ran out of the store was a woman, and I am *positive*—" I slid the printout

back across the desk to him. "—that this is the car she drove off in."

"I don't know how you can be so positive. Is this the only photograph you took?"

"Yes."

"Then you have no picture of a woman, or anybody else, for that matter, getting into this car?"

"No. That shot of your client's wife's car is the only one I had time to get."

"Uh-huh, that's what I thought. Mrs. Wellington readily admits she was driving up Newbury Street today. But she was not in the Chic Boutique this morning, didn't even make any stops anywhere near that store. My point is, in all the confusion, you obviously darted out into the street with your little camera phone and snapped a picture of the wrong car, Ms. Dymond. All you have here is a picture of Mrs. Wellington's car as she drove by the store."

There was a thin film of perspiration on Captain Torres's brow. He tugged at the knot in his yellow silk tie, pulled a matching handkerchief out of the breast pocket of his navy blue blazer, and dabbed at his forehead. He cleared his throat and gave the lawyer an apologetic look. "Dymond wasn't the only one who witnessed the woman running from the store," he said. "If you could just have Mrs. Wellington come down here to the station and . . ."

The attorney cut the captain off and scowled. "We are not going to allow you to drag the senator's wife down here so you can parade her in front of these, these—" He turned and pointed out through the glass partition. "—these *witnesses*. This affair has already upset her so badly that they had to call in the family physician. He had to sedate her. She's resting now, and when the doctor says she has recovered sufficiently for you to come over and speak with her—in my presence, of course—we will get in touch with you."

The captain looked ill, and when he spoke, his voice had the brittle sound of someone tiptoeing across political eggshells. "The senator's wife has my deepest sympathies, but there has been a fatal shooting here, and there are . . ."

The lawyer held up his hand and interrupted Torres again. "When she is well enough to speak with you, we will get in touch with you. So unless you plan to charge her with something—and before you even think about pressing any charges, I strongly suggest you consider the professional and political consequences of . . ."

This time Captain Torres held up his hand and interrupted. "Just a minute, Counselor." Then to me, "I think we're through with you for the moment, Dymond. Stay in touch; I will be speaking with you again."

"Be a lot easier to stay in touch if you gave me back my cell phone."

Torres gritted his teeth. "Lenihan has your phone. Tell him I said to give it back to you." He pointed at the door. "Now, outside, *please*." I got up and walked out the door.

Lenihan had finished with Bittamann. He waved me over and pointed to the chair by the side of his desk. I went over and sat.

"How's it going inside?"

"I don't know. The senator's lawyer is doing everything he can to keep Torres away from Mrs. Wellington. Looks like Torres may have to back off for the moment. Wellington sure seems to carry the big stick around here."

"Oh yeah, we know all about the clout he's got in this town. This isn't the first time he's run this play on us."

"You mean this has happened before?"

"Sure has. She's got a string of shoplifting complaints longer than one of the senator's speeches."

"She's a klepto?"

"Yup. And every time there's a complaint, Wellington gets it squoshed and hushed."

"Squoshed? I don't think there is any such word."

"Sure there is. I just said it."

"There's squished and squashed, but I'm pretty sure no *squoshed*."

"Luke told me you could be a pain about stuff like that."

"Luke? You mean Lucas Claymore?"

"Yeah, him, Sergeant Lucas Claymore. I asked around about you and found out you were on the job for a few years, rode with Luke out of the A-1, so I gave him a call."

"And?"

"And he said you were okay, a real pain in the ass sometimes, but okay."

"I'll bet Luke didn't really say that—the 'pain in the ass' part, I mean."

Lenihan almost smiled.

"Well, squish, squash, or squosh," I said, "this one won't be that easy to hush; somebody died this time."

Lenihan looked over at the captain's office. "Maybe." He looked back at me and frowned. "What do you know about Bittamann?"

"Bittamann? Not much. I just got this gig a couple of days ago, and Peterson is the one I dealt with at Chic Boutique. Dan seemed competent, but I got a sense he held some sort of animosity toward Peterson. After the shooting this morning he said something about Peterson not being able to call him Danielle anymore."

Lenihan arched his eyebrows. "You didn't know he was gay?"
"Who? Peterson?"

"No. Bittamann. That was his partner over there—" He nodded toward the now empty bench on the other side of the rail. "—the young guy doing all the hollering while you were in with the captain. Bittamann called him from here to let him know where he was and what happened."

"So who's the Peter Griffin look-alike he was trying to skewer with his forefinger?"

"Peter who?"

"Griffin," I said, "You know, *Family Guy*?"

"Oh, that guy. Never watch it. But the guy Bittamann's partner was screaming at is Alexander Damon; he's the New England district manager for the Chic Boutique chain. Called him in to let him know that as of eleven o'clock this morning, his Newbury Street store had become a crime scene on account of the manager getting shot."

"Looked like the two of them were gonna go knuckle-city for a minute there," I said. "What was that all about?"

"Long story. But from what I can gather, Bittamann and Peterson both had been working at the Chic Boutique forever. And while Bittamann worked his butt off, Peterson was habitually late, called in sick a lot, and managed to be somewhere else whenever there was any heavy lifting to do. Meanwhile, Bittamann worked days, went to Northeastern nights, and wound up getting a degree in business administration. So when the old manager retired last year, Dan figures he's a shoo-in for the job.

"Thing is, he knew from the get-go that Damon was a raging homophobe, so at work at least, he stayed in the closet."

"Let me guess," I said, "Peterson found out Bittamann was gay and leaked it to Damon."

"You got it. Nothing Mister Damon could do about it, though. Afraid someone'd slap him with a discrimination suit if he canned Bittamann, so he just passed over him and made Peterson manager. Bittamann's partner knows that's what happened; that's what he was screaming at Damon about. Telling him this all happened on account of him being prejudiced about Dan being gay and not makin' him manager."

"Not a bad motive for murder," I said.

Lenihan did his arched eyebrow thing again. "What, the partner comes into the store in drag, shoots Peterson, runs out, and jumps into the senator's wife's car and makes his escape?"

"No." I shook my head. "But . . ."

"Besides, six witnesses say that at the time of the shooting he

was in the bank on State Street where he works."

"So you did check him out."

"Yeah. And he doesn't own a gun either. At least not legally. Neither does Bittamann. But guess who does?"

I glanced over at the captain's office, where a heated discussion on politics and the law was still boiling over, then back at Lenihan.

"The senator's wife owns a gun?"

"Wow. Luke said you were pretty smart for a girl. You're right again. She's got a legally registered .32—one of those cute little PPK Walthers, like Double-Oh-what's-his-name used to carry in those spy movies."

"The PPK's a semiauto," I said. "They find any expended brass on the scene?"

"Yup. Where the carpet meets the wall under the jewelry display. One .32-caliber ACP cartridge casing."

I must have scowled.

"Something about that bother you, Dymond?"

"Yes," I said. "That and a couple of other things that have been rattling around in the back of my mind since this morning. Is the Crime Scene Unit still over there?"

"Nope. CSU called in an hour ago. They've sealed the doors and locked up for the night."

"What do you say you and I go over and take a quick look around?" I said.

Lenihan pulled a face, shook his head, started to say no, then glanced over at his partner, who was interviewing the last of the witnesses. "Jonesy, you need any help finishing up?"

Without looking up from the keyboard, his partner shook his head. "Uh-uh. Almost done here."

"Okay then," Lenihan said, "see you here first thing in the morning. Think I'll shoot over to Newbury Street and take a quick look around."

"How d'ya turn on the lights?"

Lenihan and I were standing inside the front entrance of the Chic Boutique. In the soft amber glow from the streetlights out front, we cast long shadows down the length of the floor.

"The switches are on the back wall," I said. "I'll get 'em."

I followed my shadow to the back of the store, turned on the lights, and walked back to where Lenihan was standing by a crude outline of Peterson's body traced out on the carpet in chalk.

He crossed his arms. "Okay, Dymond, you're on; what is it seems to be buggin' you about how this thing went down?"

"According to Bittamann," I said, "a shoplifter over there at the

jewelry rack takes a five-finger-discount on a necklace, looks up and realizes Peterson's bagged her, and takes off for the front door. When Peterson runs back here to stop her, she pulls out a semiautomatic—"I cocked my thumb and pointed my finger at Lenihan's chest. —shoots him, and runs out the door. Good so far?"

Lenihan nodded. "Uh-huh."

"Fine. But since all stock semiautomatics eject spent shell casings to their right, how come the brass CSU found was over there—" I bobbed my head to the left. "—under the jewelry rack? Shouldn't it have been somewhere over there on the right, near the opposite wall?"

"Yeah, I asked the CSU guys about that."

"And gals," I said.

"What?"

"And gals. CSU guys and gals."

Lenihan rolled his eyes and sighed. "Yeah, right. Well, the CSU guys *and* gals said the powder burns indicated the muzzle of the gun was only inches away from Peterson's chest when it was fired. They figure maybe the casing bounced off some part of his outstretched arm, which deflected it off in the opposite direction."

"Possible, I guess. What did they have to say about the way he landed?" I turned and pointed to the outline of the body. "On his back with his feet toward the front of the store. If he was shot in the chest by someone running toward the front entrance, wouldn't he have gone over backwards and landed with his head toward the front of the store?"

He nodded. "I asked 'em about that too."

"And?"

"And the guys and gals of CSU said the two were close enough when the shot was fired for the shooter to have bumped into him and spun him around as she ran for the door. Or maybe he didn't go down immediately after she shot him, and she shoved him aside and ran by."

I looked down at the blocky outline of the body and shook my head. "I don't know, Sergeant, that's an awful lot of maybes."

"Yeah, I thought it was a lot of maybes too. You got any ideas on this, I'm listenin'."

"All right," I said, "let's try this."

I walked around and stood behind him so I was facing the back of the store.

He turned around and faced me. "Didn't Bogie and Bacall do something like this in *To Have and Have Not*?"

"Not quite," I said. "She went all the way around. Now suppose I'm still the shooter, but facing this way toward the back of the

store, and you're still Peterson, but now you're facing the front. I shoot you—" I did my finger thing again. "—bang. Now the brass, ejected to the right, lands over there by the jewelry rack where they found it, and you go straight over backwards and hit the deck with your feet toward the front of the store—" I pointed to the chalked outline of Peterson's body. "—like that."

Lenihan scowled. "If that's the way it went down, Bittamann sure is ass-backwards confused."

"Or lying," I said. "And a couple of other things have been bothering me since this morning."

"I know there was a lot of confusion, the woman bolting out the door, people screaming and getting knocked down, the shot echoing back and forth between the buildings, but every time I rerun the scene in my head, it comes out the same way. I could swear I heard the gunshot a half a second *after* she came charging out through the door, not before."

I could almost see the gears meshing and the cogs starting to turn behind Lenihan's eyes as he gazed off at some spot a million or more miles beyond my right shoulder. He finally focused and said, "Anything else, Slim?"

"Slim?" I shook my head. "You have to stop sitting up nights watching those late movies. But, yes, there is something else."

"Don't know what you're talkin' about. I never watch late movies. And what's the something else that's bothering you?"

"This may seem like nothing, but when I ran into the store this morning, Bittamann was coming out of the back room with his cell phone in his hand. But when I asked him if he'd called 911, he said he had and that he'd used the phone in the back room."

"So?"

"So I'm having trouble picturing him picking up the phone in the back room and keying in 911 with his cell phone in his hand."

"Now that's one I can check on," he said.

Lenihan took the phone off his belt and thumbed in a number. "Yeah, Lenihan here. I wanna check the dispatch log on the origin of the 911 on the Peterson murder this morning."

Silence.

"No, not tomorrow, *now*."

More silence.

"Okay, thanks."

He closed his phone and clipped it back on his belt. "The 911 didn't originate from the landline here at the store. It came in from Bittamann's cell phone." He turned and looked back toward the stockroom. "So if he didn't go back in there to use the phone like he told you, what was he doing back there?"

We both headed back toward the stockroom at the same time. Lenihan was about to step through the archway, with me right behind him, when we heard someone walk up to the back door outside and stick a key in the lock.

I took a quick swipe at the switches, dousing the lights, and we each ducked back behind the wall on opposite sides of the archway.

The back door opened and closed softly.

A beam of light danced briefly down the showroom floor and disappeared as someone with a flashlight slipped into the back room.

There was a short metallic screech of something scraping on the concrete floor.

Lenihan slipped over to my side of the archway and whispered, "Lights."

I hit the switches and followed him into the back room.

On his knees at the end of a row of metal lockers he had pulled away from the wall, a wide-eyed and startled Daniel Bittamann snapped his head around and gaped at us. He had a flashlight in one hand and the stainless steel pistol he had fished out from behind the lockers in the other.

Lenihan was pointing an ancient .38 revolver at him. "Nice and easy, Bittamann, put the gun down."

Bittamann looked terrified. He froze, stared at Lenihan, and did not move.

I stepped around Lenihan so Bittamann could see me and quietly said, "Dan."

He turned his head and looked at me.

"Put the gun down on the floor."

He looked down at the gun as though he'd forgotten he had it in his hand, then placed it and the flashlight on the floor.

Lenihan said, "Good, now hands behind your back."

Lenihan holstered the .38, handcuffed Bittamann, and helped him to his feet. "I'm placing you under arrest for removin' a police seal and entering a posted CRIME SCENE—DO NOT ENTER area, and for tampering with evidence. Now ya got a right to stay absolutely silent here, on account of anything you say can and more than likely will be used against you in a court of law."

Lenihan completed the loose paraphrase of Miranda and asked Bittamann if he understood those rights.

Bittamann nodded.

"No," Lenihan said, "you gotta say it out loud."

"Yes, I understand."

"Yes, you understand what?"

"My rights."

"Close enough. Now you wanna tell us what you're doing with that gun you just dragged out from behind the lockers and how it got there?"

Bittamann opened his mouth to answer, hesitated, then closed it. I spoke quietly again. "Dan?"

He wrinkled his brow and looked over at me.

"It wasn't Earl Peterson who beeped me this morning, was it?"

He dropped his eyes and shook his head.

"It was you up front who saw the woman shoplifting, called my beeper, then ran over and confronted her, wasn't it?"

He looked up at me and nodded.

"And where was Peterson?"

Dan's eyes were misting over. "In the back room."

"What happened, Dan?"

A single tear ran down his cheek. "Earl came running out onto the floor when he heard me holler at the woman. When she looked back at him, I stuck my hand into her bag to get the necklace. But what I grabbed ahold of was a gun. I pulled it out of her bag, and while I was standing there staring at it, she ducked around me and ran for the door, and then . . . then . . ."

"Then what, Dan?"

Tears were streaming down both his cheeks now. "I don't know. Earl was screaming at me. He tried to yank the gun out of my hand. He yelled, 'Give me that goddamned gun, you pervert, she's getting away.'"

Lenihan came up alongside of me and said, "And what, you just shot him?"

"No . . . I don't know . . . I don't remember even hearing the gun go off. All I remember is Earl lying there on the floor bleeding."

"But I bet you remember lying to Dymond about being in the back room to use the office phone to call 911," Lenihan said, "when what you really went in there for was to toss the gun behind the lockers."

Dan's shoulders sagged, and his body shook convulsively. "God," he sobbed. "What've I done?"

Lenihan's tough countenance and cop's eyes softened for a couple of heartbeats before he turned and stepped out into the store. He opened his phone and punched in a number.

"Yeah, Lenihan here. I'm at the Chic Boutique over on Newbury. I need transport for a prisoner and someone from CSU to bag a gun."

Two weeks later, Daniel Bittamann had been arrested, arraigned, indicted, denied bail, and was sitting in county lockup awaiting

trial for second-degree murder. Dan and his partner had hired one of the best criminal defense attorneys in Boston, who, when interviewed on one of the morning shows, said he was confident he could get the charge reduced to involuntary manslaughter. I hoped that he could, but I wasn't that confident.

Thanks to her powerful husband and his lawyer, the senator's wife wasn't even on the radar anymore. It helped, of course, that when the police—who were finally allowed to see her—questioned Mrs. Wellington on the whereabouts of her gun, she went to get it for them and discovered it miraculously missing. "Stolen," the senator was sure, "while the missus and I were on vacation." The news stories didn't even mention the senator or his wife, but they sure had a field day with me.

Along with my picture, the who, what, where, when, and why of my involvement in the shooting made it through two full news cycles. The two remaining merchants who had hired me said that my picture plastered all over the evening news for two days running would make working undercover in their stores impossible and that my connection to the murder would be bad for business. They didn't say it, but I think they held me responsible for Peterson's death, thought I somehow should have been there to prevent it. At any rate, they exercised the right-to-terminate clause in our contract.

Like I said, there's more than one kind of mean.

And most days, more than enough to go around. 🦅



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THE END OF THE LINE

LESLIE BUDEWITZ

Everyone left Kina.

Sooner or later, one way or another, everyone left the village. Its gray stone towers had housed the Maniot people for centuries, its terraced fields had grown their olives and grapes, its steep hillside pastures had fed the goats that gave them meat and milk and cheese. Scores of tourists—Greeks and foreigners—drove fast cars through the Mani's narrow roads, stopping to gawk at the towers and marvel at the sea, the wild Mediterranean. They came and they left. Dmitra had left once. At first, Cyprian counted the months on his fingers. But when the girl had been gone more months than his hands could tell, he'd stopped counting. When the seasons had gone full circle and the olive trees were once again in flower, he realized he did not want to know how long his daughter, his only surviving child, had been gone.

He'd only wanted her to return.

But now, the girl's wondering—and her wandering—were over. In the truest spirit of the Maniot, the people of the god Aries, he had done what was necessary.

And she would stay.

Life had been hard for Cyprian, but he had known its blessings. His Sofia—what a blessing she had been. With soft eyes and hair as dark as the shadows of midnight, she was just a teenager herself when Cyprian married her. He was older, not long back from the civil war that had followed the Italian and German invasions. His eyes bore the scars of battle, and so did his heart, and even though the village girls knew they could no longer be choosy about husbands, not one of those starry maidens dreamed of marrying Cyprian.

Until Sofia.

Cyprian leaned back in his wooden chair, its blue paint chipped and worn but still as bright as the sky over Kina on the day she accepted his proposal. He could see her laughing up at him, a hand trailing through the blood-red poppies, her heart one with his. Only death could take Sofia from him, or from Kina, and it finally had. She lay in her grave a hundred meters above the village, on the same hillside where they'd buried their sons: Nikolaus, the eldest, dead of a fever at two. Then, years later, Pavlo. Cyprian's heart had nearly broken when the sure-footed youth, raised on the rocks like a goat, fell from a stone wall and tumbled like the pod of a thistle toward the sea.

How long had it been? He could not say. Sofia had taught him long ago to leave the carving of notches in the door frame for happy times. "For the blessed memories," she'd said. "The ones God gives us to keep us company."

Their deaths had left Cyprian with his fields, his herd, his stone towers, and his treasure: Dmitra.

Ah, Dmitra, the child of his old age. So much like her mother it made his heart weep to see her among the olive trees, in the garden, or resting against the kitchen doorway.

She was a good girl, who did as she was told. Like the other village girls, she had little schooling, but Pavlo had taught her to read and write in Greek, and she spoke the language better than Cyprian did. He was a Maniot and preferred the old tongue.

After Sofia's death, the girl took over her mother's chores and the house ran almost as well. Better in some ways, he had to admit.

But a few seasons after Sofia died, the summer the fires raged through the Mani, an ugly spirit rose up in the girl. Cyprian blamed the fires. They blazed through the drought-stricken olive groves and scorched the earth that had fed so many Maniot for so long. They destroyed the vines, the fields, the gardens. They blackened the famed stone towers at Vathia almost beyond recognition.

They conquered the Mani in ways no foreign army ever could.

And behind them came the strangers—and Dmitra's questions. Whenever foreigners stopped in Kina, Dmitra greeted them. Mainland Greeks came to fight the fires, and Dmitra asked questions. Men came from the European Union with talk of money for reforestation, for rebuilding, and Dmitra asked questions. Albanians came to work the stone, with skills only the ablest of the Maniot men still possessed, and Dmitra asked questions.

He, old Cyprian, never ill a day in his life except for the fevers from the war wounds, became sickened by her questions. By her talk of leaving.

He feared he would lose her, despite his insistence that her future belonged in the Mani. Her desire to see the world beyond these hills burned just as strong.

"Papa," Dmitra said, "why should I stay? There's nothing here, nothing in all of Mani."

"Nothing?" he shouted. "You know nothing. Everything is here. The sea, the sky. The goats, burros, olive trees. The village your family built, where we've lived for centuries."

She shook her fist at him and at the gray stone tower that was their home, high above the narrow road that wound through the town. So angry at him that she forgot to close the pine shutter of her bedroom at the top of the tower, letting the sun glint off the glass. A sailor would go blind, he told her.

"There is no future here," she said. "Nothing to do but what you've always done. That's no life for a girl."

"It was good enough for your mother." For Sofia.

Her face softened; she tilted her head, and a wisp of black hair loosened from her scarf.

For a moment, he forgot who she was. "Sofia," he said softly, his hand reaching toward her.

"Papa," she said, "life in Kina was enough for Mama because she had you." And that had been true. Cyprian and Sofia fit together like stone against stone at the base of a tower. They had been the life and foundation, the joy, of Kina for forty-one years.

No need of notches to remember that.

He feared he would lose his daughter, despite his insistence that her future belonged in the Mani. Her desire to see the world beyond these hills burned just as strong.

Cyprian would not prevent Dmitra from going to another village on the peninsula, to Lagio or even Katronas. How else could she meet an eligible boy? A Mani boy, like his Pavlo, dead too young, or Nikolaus, who had no chance to live. It was up to Dmitra to carry on the family line. Though if she didn't marry, he would understand. Not many young men were left in the Mani.

Pavlo had left once. He'd made it all the way to Sparta and came back with nothing but a twelve-gauge shotgun and dissatisfaction with everything Mani. Cyprian could not bear such a loss again.

"You belong here," he told his daughter. "You have no need to be anywhere else."

"Papa, you have no need. But me—" She pointed at her heart, her cheeks flushed the red of the setting sun. "—I want to see more."

"No one has ever conquered the Mani," he replied, as though that were reason enough, and she tossed her dish towel on the table in exasperation.



The spring moon was full. In its pale light, Dmitra placed her feet with care between the crocuses and irises lining the old burro trail, ever mindful of the tragedy that had befallen her family here, when Pavlo stumbled to his death.

Pavlo, elder brother, much loved, much missed. She had never known Nikolaus, dead long before she was born. How different life would be if one of them had lived. Papa would still fiercely maintain that her place was here, among the rocks, the wind, and the sea, but she would have an advocate, a younger voice—a male voice—to plead her case.

She spread her skirt with care and settled on a rock wall overlooking the village and the sea beyond. She loved Kina, no question. She had no desire to leave here forever. Just for a while.

"A little while, Papa," she'd begged over and over. "A few months, a year. Let me take a job with a family watching children, or in a school."

Over and over, he tried to make her see that there was no use for such a world; they had everything they needed here in Kina. Here on the Mani, the southern tip of the Peloponnese, the farthest south one could go without crossing to an island. Outsiders thought it harsh and desolate. They were weak; Papa was strong, and so was Dmitra, because they were Mani.

She turned her gaze to the south, where moonlight softened the hard edges of the square towers and turned the stone almost golden. This was her home. Her ancestors had built the tower houses stone by stone. They'd cleared the slopes and built the terraces like the one she sat on. They had planted the trees and nurtured them.

Out on the water, a ship moved slowly across the horizon. Her heart quickened. Her friend Melina had found a job on a tourist ship—Dmitra had saved the postcards sent from ports around the world, names she was not sure how to pronounce: Le Havre, Copenhagen, Bristol, St. Petersburg, Miami. And Istanbul, the name that would send her father into a rage at the vile Turks, even though the only Turk she had ever met had been a road worker, young and handsome. Her father had raged for days after seeing her talk with the Turk at the taverna where she waited tables. The roadwork must have ended then, because she had seen the Turk no more.

Dmitra knelt beside the terrace and pulled out a loose stone. Behind, in the secret space, lay the olive wood box Pavlo had carved for her tenth birthday. She slid it out, sat once more on the stone wall, and removed the lid. One by one, she looked longingly

at the postcards. She did not need Copenhagen or Miami. Athens would do, or Nafplion. Perhaps she could work in Monemvasia, in a taverna or one of the small hotels. She'd heard talk of the village at the head of a causeway and the ancient settlement, now partly restored, where people came from all over Europe and even America to hike and swim and watch the sea. A different sea.

That's all she wanted—a taste of something different.

She slipped the folded drachmas out of her skirt pocket and put them in the box, between Istanbul and Lisbon. Almost enough now, for the plan she and Eleni were making.

When Dmitra looked up, the horizon was empty. The ship had sailed on.

Every now and then, late in the evening, Cyprian took himself to the taverna to sit on the terrace outside, to share a bottle of ouzo and the talk of men. "I saw that Dmitra of yours coming into the village this morning," Milos said as Cyprian topped off the small green glasses that dotted the table. "Wildflowers in her hair. What a sight, that girl."

"A sight," Petros agreed. "Like your Sofia."

"Ah, Sofia." May she rest in peace, they all thought, though no one said the words. To speak them was to acknowledge the pain, and that they could not do.

The old men puffed on their cigarettes, drank more ouzo, talked about everything, talked about nothing. Their sons, their grandsons, their women. The olive crop, the health of the goats and cattle, last year's retsina. The change in the winds as the seasons cycled round. A gray cat missing the tip of one ear wove between their legs, searching for crumbs of dense yellow bread or a dropped bit of cheese.

Finally, Kostas set his glass down hard on the scarred wooden tabletop and leaned forward, shaking his finger at Cyprian. "You are a selfish old man, refusing to let your daughter live her own life."

Cyprian's jaw tightened and above his deeply veined nose, his eyes grew sharp.

"You want to keep her here," Kostas continued, "baking your bread and herding your goats. I don't blame you for wanting the company—your wife is dead and so are your sons. But your days will come to an end sooner than you think, and what will happen to your beautiful young Dmitra then, when she is no longer young or beautiful?"

Under his sun-burnished skin, Cyprian's sagging cheeks flushed. "And who are you to talk? Your daughter, that Melina. She'll

marry some Frenchman or a Spaniard, if she marries at all, and you'll never know your grandchildren."

"She's a good girl, my Melina. She sends me a postcard every week."

"And you think that means she'll come back and be content here?" Cyprian waved his hand. "Never."

Kostas shook his head once, dismissing Cyprian's doubts, and pushed back from the table, his chair scraping against the worn stone floor.

"Children are like birds," Milos said. He was the father of two daughters, each now with growing families. Indeed, when Milos was in his fields or at his stone tower, his children and grandchildren flocked around him eagerly. "You cannot hold them too tightly. They are born to fly."

Milos's flowery talk set Cyprian ablaze. "You are fools. You know nothing—"

"You are as stubborn as my black goat." Kostas threw himself back into the fray. "I should send that goat over to you—trailing him through the mountains will keep you nimble. You can wait for him at night like you wait for your daughter."

With those words, the rage that had fueled Mani warriors for generations spilled over. "Old man!" Cyprian shouted, rising from his chair so suddenly that it tipped over behind him, narrowly missing the gray cat. "You have insulted me for the last time."

Whitehaired Petros put a gnarled hand on Cyprian's forearm. "Calm yourself," he said in the manner of a man who has known another for decades and drunk the fruit of many vines with him. "Sit."

Breathing heavily, Cyprian glared at the others.

Petros righted the chair with one hand, the other still holding back his friend. "Sit," Petros repeated. "He means nothing against your name or your honor."

Cyprian lowered himself into the chair, grabbed his glass, and downed the liquor. Poured another and gripped it tight, his eyes locked with those of the man across the table, always the friend who dared to challenge him, always the friend who was not a friend.

Milos lit a cigarette from the pack that lay between them. "Kostas speaks too bluntly, but he speaks the truth. No, no," he said and held out a hand as Cyprian made to interrupt. "We all see how your Dmitra walks the hillsides. It's nothing, we know that. She's alone—who could a young girl meet anywhere near Kina?"

The men exchanged glances and nods.

"She's looking at the stars. She's dreaming. She's picking wild

crocuses and orchids by moonlight. She is a gift from the heavens. You are right to cherish her." Milos took a puff and fell silent. Petros refilled the glasses.

"But Kostas is also right to question you," Milos continued, his words cutting through the cloud of blue smoke that hovered above the table. The men were alone on the terrace. Only the owner remained inside, washing glasses and ashtrays. "The fates have denied you the chance to watch your sons grow old. Even so, your daughter deserves a future."

Cyprian stirred, and Petros laid a reassuring hand on his arm.

"I have a solution," Milos said. "A nephew—the nephew of a cousin. His father has more sons than land, and I have been considering hiring him to work with me."

Milos's daughters had married men with land of their own. And while Milos would be happy to share his land with his sons-in-law, the old men all understood his sympathy with the nephew who had no prospects.

Cyprian stared at the table, at the bottle, at his glass, not wanting to agree to the unspoken proposition. Finally, he reached for his glass. "Does this boy walk upright? Does he have two eyes, two ears, two balls? Will he treat her well?" He drank deeply and the other men all laughed and clapped each other on the back. The nephew could come and Cyprian would take a look.

And life would go on as it should, in Kina, in the land of the Mani.

Dmitra's father had not told her Georgos was coming, nor said anything about a possible match. Still, all of Kina knew everything about the young man—whether it was true or not—long before he arrived, and how could she not wonder? Would he be like kind, gentle Milos, handsome despite his years and stooped spine? Or would he be completely unsuitable, barely able to talk to a goat, let alone a pretty girl of seventeen?

No, she persuaded herself. How could I possibly be happy with a boy who wants to live here?

And yet, she did love Kina. In the spring, when the olive groves blossomed and the air smelled so sweet, the hillside covered with crocuses and anemone, how could any place be more beautiful?

After her shift at the taverna, before it was time to make her father's evening meal, Dmitra went to collect the goats. And there, on a terrace not far from the spot where she liked to dream, sat a boy—a young man—of maybe nineteen or twenty. His skin was dark, his hair curly, and even from a distance, she could tell his jaw was strong and his eyes swift.

Georgos turned in her direction and the quick tilt of his head told her he had seen her. It was the goat's bell that caught his attention, she thought. Not the touch of my gaze.

He stood, and the gesture told her he knew who she was and liked what he saw.

Georgos and Dmitra fetched the goats together every evening for the next few weeks. As the young people trailed the small herd toward the terrace behind the tower, Cyprian felt a burden ease. He trundled inside and up to the small chamber he had shared with Sofia.

Her lace scarf still lay on the bureau, her icon hanging above it. And in a frame he had carved himself, a photo of his bride on their wedding day, so many years ago.

"You see, I was right," he told her picture. "We will have a bride again soon. Almost as beautiful as you." He sat at the foot of the bed, the photo in hand, until darkness fell and the smells of his dinner cooking rose through the tower. Slowly he stood, kissed the photo and replaced it, then kissed the icon.

When he descended into the main room, he saw his daughter standing in front of the stone sink, back to him, head bowed over her hands.

"Dmitra," he began.

"Papa," she said, spinning around and shoving something he could not see into her skirt pocket. He could not see, but he could guess.

He held out his arms, a smile crinkling his leathered face. "You don't need to count your money, girl. You think me a poor man and I am, but I have been planning for this day. Don't you worry. Your old father can afford a pretty wedding for his only daughter."

"A wed— Papa, no. No, not a wedding." Her mouth tightened and she closed her eyes. When they opened a moment later, they were damp. "No, Papa, no." She turned and ran out the tower door.

Cyprian ate the stew she had left and watered the goats. He sat in front of the tower and waited. The stars rose, the moon rose. He slept in his hard chair and woke and slept again a dozen times.

Dmitra was gone.

She sent a message through a neighbor, one whose own children had gone—to Scutari, to Stoupa and Kalamati—and who did not care enough to complain.

Cyprian complained. He complained to the neighbor, to the walls of the house and the village, to the olive trees and the goats. He complained to Petros and Kostas, and to the keeper of the taverna. He complained to Milos that his nephew was good for noth-

ing, though he had to admit, the young man worked hard, talked easily, and seemed like the right kind of boy.

After Cyprian had complained long enough and loud enough, he tended the garden and tried to forget the girl.

But the Mani had lived here nearly eight hundred years, and he could not forget. He tended his goats, he trimmed his vines and plucked his olives. He watched the sea and the stars and every night he spoke to Sofia with sadness in his heart.

And then, one day, Dmitra returned. He hardly recognized her: her head uncovered, her hair flowing long and loose. She wore a gauzy white blouse, like the gown Sofia had worn on their wedding night, and a dark skirt. At least it was a skirt, not trousers, though it came just to her knees and showed her calves and her trim ankles in their leather sandals. Tiny gold loops pierced her ears. She was lovely, this outsider, his daughter.

She approached him shyly at first, then rushed forward, throwing her arms around him. He wanted to brush her away, but he could not. Dmitra had come home.

The young man with her worried him. Andreas, he was called. He spoke only Greek, so Dmitra translated. A fisherman from a village on the island of Hydra, from a family that had always fished. He stared at the stone villages of the Mani as if they were strange.

They were in love, they said, and intended to make their lives on the island. "Papa, be happy for me," she pleaded. Cyprian could only nod his head and worry.

He watched from the tower yard as Dmitra walked Andreas up the hill to the graves of her mother and her brothers, to the stone terrace where she'd sat so many hours, longing for another world. Though he couldn't see the goats, he heard their bells tinkling on the afternoon breeze as they rushed to her, and he heard Dmitra and Andreas laughing.

It was good to have her home. And yet fear gripped Cyprian's heart.

At last they returned, Andreas cradling a small kid in his arms.

"Papa, the kid has an injured foot," Dmitra said.

Cyprian grunted. "Goat meat stew tonight."

"No, sir, please," Andreas said in Greek that Dmitra translated. "The leg's not fully broken. I can bind the bone with a splint and a cloth, and it will heal."

"What does a fisherman know?"

Cyprian's displeasure needed no translation, though the young man's response did. "I've cared for animals all my life, sir. I have an ointment in my pack that will speed the healing."

"Papa, please," Dmitra said. "Let him try," and Cyprian could not say no.

Dmitra insisted Cyprian go to the taverna for supper with them. The keeper's wife made the most tender lamb, the spiciest eggplant, the sweetest tzatziki. The neighbors in the town greeted her, shared wine, smiled and laughed, approving of the beautiful girl and the young man who spoke politely and could scarcely take his eyes off her.

And yet, Cyprian could take no pleasure in the food or in the joy of his daughter's return.

That night, on the front terrace, Andreas brought out a bottle of ouzo, a gift for the old man. They all drank from Sophia's tiny glasses, but Cyprian would not drink a second glass. That would mean he accepted the young man, and his intentions.

The moon rose. The young people bid him good night and walked up the hillside to say their own good night. Dmitra climbed to her room in the tower, and her young man headed for the goat shed to bed down in the loft.

On the terrace, in the blue chair with the woven reed seat, Cyprian poured a second glass from the bottle and stared at the sea and the sky.

The moon, and his heart, told him what he must do.

The next morning, the girl sat on the stone threshold, her hair uncombed, her blouse untucked. "Papa," she sobbed, "Andreas is gone."

Cyprian's heart lurched at the sound of her tears, the way it lurched at Sofia's tears when Pavlo died. "Hush, girl. He was no good for you."

When Cyprian returned from the hillside that evening, the pine table held the fresh yellow bread he loved and a bowl of country salad. He smelled the tomatoes and eggplant of moussaka baking and knew he had done the right thing.

But the table was set for one, and Dmitra did not eat or drink. She dabbed at her face with a crisp white handkerchief of her mother's. "He said he loved me. We planned to be married and love each other like you and Mama."

A brief stab of regret tore into Cyprian's heart. He tapped a small cask of retsina, his homemade wine, and shoved a glass toward his daughter. "Drink. It will heal your heart."

But nothing seemed to heal her heart. Georgos came to visit and she sat, silent, showing no interest in his talk of the fields or the animals. After a few visits, he did not return. She spent the days staring at the sea or wandering in the olive grove, watering the trees with tears.

Then one day, Cyprian returned to the tower with the goats to see that the girl had laid two places on the table. She ate with him that night and every night after. She cooked and cleaned and tended the tower, all as her mother had taught her. She began to work in the taverna again, a few hours a week, though her smile was not so sweet as before and her tips not so generous.

Cyprian tossed the dark green twelve-gauge shell out to sea and traded the young man's pack and clothing to a neighbor who could be trusted. And at night, while the girl walked the hillside, he sat on his terrace and drank the last of the ouzo, raising his glass to the unconquerable Mani. 🐦

Solution to the November "UNSOLVED"

Hazel the snitch is the wife of Abe Pitts. They made drug deliveries to the La Paloma Club at 10:00 A.M. on Wednesday.

DAY	HOUR	HUSBAND	WIFE	LAST NAME
Monday	noon	Bart	Eva	Laboda
Monday	4:00 P.M.	Joe	Flo	Rankin
Tuesday	8:00 A.M.	Chaz	Dolly	Malone
Tuesday	2:00 P.M.	Hank	June	O'Toole
Wednesday	10:00 A.M.	Abe	Hazel	Pitts
Wednesday	6:00 P.M.	Ike	Celia	Scholl
Thursday	9:00 A.M.	Eli	Amy	Karnak
Thursday	3:00 P.M.	Felix	Ida	Null
Friday	11:00 A.M.	Dan	Ginny	Quinn
Friday	5:00 P.M.	Gus	Belle	Tarloff

REEL CRIME

STEVE HOCKENSMITH

Most TV producers talk about their shows in terms of audience share, target demographics, and perhaps, if prodded, stories and characters. Not David Simon. Ask him about the fourth season of *The Wire*, the stark crime drama he created for HBO, and he'll give you the nut graf: "This one's about opportunity and the myth thereof."

For those of you who didn't take any journalism courses in college, a "nut graf" is the part of a feature story that tells the reader exactly what the point of the article is. It can be the opening paragraph, but more often it's further down, after the writer's captured the reader's interest with some sort of scene-setting or writerly slight of hand.

Take this article, for instance. The "nut" doesn't come until the fifth paragraph.

In much the same way, each season of *The Wire* (which returned September 10 after a nearly two-year hiatus) has hooked viewers with gritty, engrossing tales of crime and (occasionally) punish-



The Wire. Photo by Paul Schiraldi, courtesy HBO

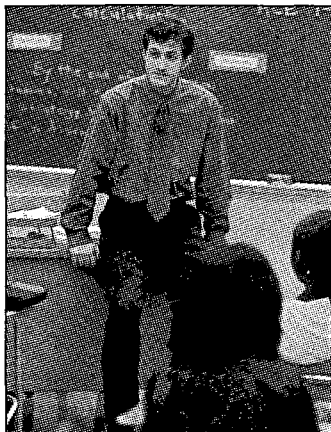
ment on the mean streets of Baltimore, while slipping in incisive points about the futility of the "war on drugs," the decline of the working class, and the human cost of petty politics.

So it should come as no surprise that the man behind the show is a journalist by training, and very much by inclination as well. Simon sees each new season of his series not as a chance to win bigger ratings, but as an opportunity to explore a different facet of modern urban life.

"I feel if someone watches [every episode] of *The Wire*, they will have seen as accurate a document as television can offer with regard to what the American city was at the millennium," says Simon, who began his career as a police reporter at the *Baltimore Sun*. "They'll

see why it was what it was—and why we couldn't fix it."

This year, the series puts the education system under the microscope (while continuing its dissection of police bureaucracy and gang hierarchy). Jermaine Crawford, Maestro Harrell, Tristan Wilds, and Julito McCullum joined the show as middle-school students struggling to stay on the right side of the law, even as temptation and tragedy push them toward crime. And in a development that echoes the real-life career switch of detective-turned-teacher (and now *Wire* producer) Ed Burns, hotheaded cop Roland Pryzbylewski (Jim True-Frost) has left the force only to take an equally challenging job: teaching in a struggling inner-city school.



The *Wire*'s Detective Pryzbylewski (Jim True-Frost). Photo by Paul Schiraldi, courtesy HBO

But perhaps the biggest change of all is the absence of Wood Harris as Avon Barksdale, the cold-blooded gang leader the show's detectives worked so hard to bring down in seasons past. Though Barksdale's gone, it doesn't take long for other wannabe drug lords to take his place—and that's the whole point, according to Simon.

"In a way, [the school storyline] is a prequel to everything we did with the Barksdale crew," he says. "The idea that a drug dealer or a gangster is born is farcical. Like every other human being on the planet, they arrive at where they arrive at because they are made."

Look at Simon himself, for example. Born in 1960, he was hitting puberty just as the Watergate and "Pentagon papers" scandals were making investigative reporters look like crusading (albeit non-caped) superheroes. Stints editing his high-school and college newspapers sealed the deal. Simon was going to be a journalist . . . for life.

"I thought I would end my career the same way I was going to begin it," he says. "As a newspaperman."

A newspaperman/author, to be more precise. In the late eighties, Simon took a leave of absence from his crime-beat gig at the *Sun* to write *Homicide: A Year on the Killing Streets*. The nonfiction look inside the Baltimore Police Department Homicide Unit didn't just earn Simon critical hosannas (and an Edgar Award), it got him a TV deal too—the NBC series *Homicide: Life on the Street* was based on the book.



And that's how David Simon, journalist, began his transformation into David Simon, TV producer. After penning well-received scripts for *Homicide*, he was offered a position as a staff writer and eventually producer. He parlayed that experience into an HBO miniseries based on his second book, *The Corner: A Year in the Life of an Inner-City Neighborhood* (which he cowrote with former Baltimore cop/teacher Burns). The first season of *The Wire* followed two years later.

And the final season of *The Wire* will start filming on the streets of Baltimore next year, if Simon gets his way. He says he's got one last slice of urban life to look at. And it's one he knows well: the media.

"It's fascinating for me as a former reporter how our media get poverty, the drug culture, policing, and politics so consistently wrong," he says. "Having laid the groundwork by depicting these problems for four seasons, I feel like the last piece is explaining how we as a people perceive them, and how that contributes to our inability to solve anything."

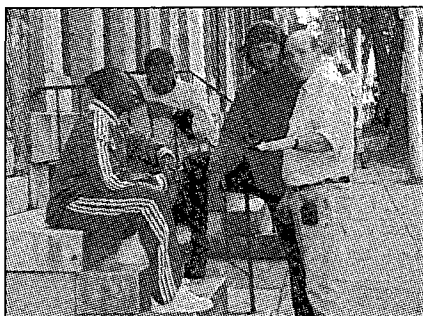
But before Simon can put that last piece of the puzzle in place, he has to get the okay from HBO. And unfortunately, HBO's position remains TBD.

"They're waiting to see what happens with season four," Simon explains. "Will our fans be disappointed because the Barksdale story ended? Will the critics say the show has lost a step? It would've been nice if [the network] had said, 'Yeah, take another season. Don't even worry about it.' But let's face it, we are going in a different direction from the Barksdale story."

If HBO cuts *The Wire*, Simon might head in a really different direction next: south, to New Orleans. He's currently working with former *Homicide* producer Eric Overmyer to develop a series set in the Big Easy.

But Simon won't be leaving Baltimore behind, if he can help it. For one thing, he shares a home there with fellow *Sun* alum (and award-winning mystery novelist) Laura Lippman. And he remains determined to put the final stitches in the vast tapestry he's been weaving with *The Wire*.

"The cast, the crew—we all feel the same way," he says. "We've created something special here, and we want to finish it."



Wire creator David Simon (right) chats with cast members.
Photo by Paul Schiraldi, courtesy HBO

WITH MINE OWN HANDS THIS GRAVE I DIG

BRIAN MUIR

He only had a vague idea of where he was. He'd paid little attention to the roads on the way out, still in a daze over recent events. He wasn't certain of the time either, but knew it had to be after one A.M. That's when he'd hefted the body into the trunk of the car.

On hands and knees in a grassy clearing between towering fir trees, he looked up but couldn't see the moon, only bright stars, powdered sugar dusting a crow's wing.

A chorus of crickets, a million strong, sang a metronome from dark hiding. The wind was high, shushing treetops like waves lapping a distant shore.

In his hurry to leave he'd only grabbed a small garden trowel from her garage instead of the shovel. With the trowel he'd been able to dig up the first clumps of dry earth and weeds. Grass roots popped and crackled as he pulled them free.

But the smooth-worn wooden handle snapped off the trowel, and the spade head proved too difficult to wield, cutting into his palms with every shove he exerted.

He flung it away—*krang!*—off a dead stump into a thicket of black vines.

Using bare hands, he clawed furiously at topsoil, guessing at how big the hole should be, cursing under his breath as he once more widened his dig parameters.

She was a small girl, more delicate than those he normally dated. He preferred larger women, brusque and domineering, a challenge for him to control.

But Caroline was different. Petite but perfectly proportionate figure, oval face, and wide, deep green eyes. Her tiny mouth was like kissing two soft berries.

However, it wasn't her beauty that allured him. He'd been with many pretty women before, though most of the Amazonian persuasion and of compatible hot-tempered bent.

What's that they say about opposites? He was a red state conservative, she a blue liberal; he a baptized Catholic, she a practicing Buddhist. He liked veal and Randolph Scott westerns, for her it was sushi and *The Simpsons*, those incessant reruns and Homer's obnoxious "D'oh!"

Is that why I killed her? he wondered.

No. That only played a small part, that and more. And so much less.

He scooped more dirt, cold and moist, hunched over the hole like a terrier burying a bone. Raw fingertips struck imbedded stone, shooting a splinter of pain up his right arm. The dimming flashlight beam revealed the nail on his middle finger was peeled back, dangling from a cuticle edge. Wincing, he slowly pulled it all the way free, sucking cold night air between clenched teeth. Underneath the nail, the flesh pink and stinging.

He closed his eyes to the pain, remembering one of the Psalms, "Bow down thine ear, O Lord, and hear me . . ."

Fortified, he resumed digging, dirt packing under his nails until fingers felt like plump hot sausages on the ends of his hands. But he put the pain at the back of his mind and kept digging. He had to.

There was no other choice.

His brother had told him it would never work. "Man, she sure is cute," he'd said. "But the two of you are too different. I know you. Careful, bro."

Caroline's brother Dex had voiced similar objections, not liking her new beau from the start, warning her about a perceived brooding intensity.

But they'd proved their brothers wrong, enjoying each other's company beyond the physical. She taught him to appreciate Midwestern art, and he shared with her a love of history, telling her one of his favorite stories, about the Shimbara revolt of Christian-converted samurai in seventeenth-century Japan.

When they weren't talking history or art, they were laughing at their differences, even joking about them, swelled hearts forgiving sharp-tongued barbs.

Yes, they'd proved their brothers wrong. At first.

Then the sheen of their shared interests began to dull while the barbs between them stabbed more sharply; physical affection

waning as swelled hearts atrophied, like air hissing from ripe red balloons.

Caroline began spending less and less time at his place, making excuses to avoid dates. He knew what that meant but didn't want to think it was happening to him. That happened to other guys.

So he reached out one more time, for dinner, earlier that evening. Not to reconcile, for they'd never officially broken up. More to know the reason why.

Things felt so good before, so right. Could that ephemeral thing be recaptured and allowed to blossom? He wondered if perhaps there was something about himself that he could change to make things work.

Or maybe something that Caroline could change about herself.

That had been a mistake, he now realized, to present it to her in that way.

A drop of sweat clouded one eye. He wiped it away with the back of his sleeve, realizing he couldn't see his hands. He had dug nearly two feet deep. Far but not nearly far enough. So much more to dig.

He propped the flashlight on the lip of the grave, wedging a rock under it so the dying beam angled down into the hole.

On the back of his hands, blood and dirt mingled, encrusting black. Fresh blisters popped. Cut by sharp rocks, his fingertips bled afresh, beading maroon in the jaundiced flashlight beam.

Why did I throw that spade away? Stupid, stupid.

If only he'd been driving his truck tonight, full of his contractor's tools (and a sturdy shovel), but he'd tried to impress her with his new car.

The result being no shovel, a busted spade, and much more digging to do.

"It's over, honey," she said.

"You want me to go, but you still call me honey? What's that all about?"

"It's my nature. It doesn't mean I secretly want you to stay. It means go. Please. Honey."

This time, the "honey" was crystallized.

"I just want—"

"I know what you want. You want to know why. You want it's dotted and t's crossed. You want things to follow a plan, like the blueprints for one of your construction jobs."

She left him pondering that as she stepped to the kitchen to remove a wailing teapot from the stove. She returned with the pot

and cups on a tray, set it on the coffee table in front of him.

"But a relationship doesn't always come out according to plan. You can't fix it with the swing of a hammer, honey."

"Don't talk to me like that. I'm not a kid," he said.

"I'm sorry, that's not the way I mean it to sound, but let's not overcomplicate this. We had our bells and whistles at the beginning; that's why it was so nice."

"Nice?" He was stung.

"It was great." She meant it.

But he wasn't appeased.

"It's just that I have to do my own thing, follow my own path, and it's not with you. Like those samurai you were telling me about, the ones who converted to Christianity. They went against tradition and put crosses on their helmets and carried rosaries. That was the path they had to follow. They had to do their own thing." She poured tea in both cups.

Do their own thing? Fuming, he couldn't believe he was listening to this patter.

She continued. "Most people with our differences couldn't even share a drink without clawing each other's eyes out, but we did. And we had fun. Two human beings enjoying each other for a little bit of time in this insane, mixed-up world. Can't you be happy with that? Satisfied with that? Please?"

She laid a soft hand on the back of his wrist. Intended as a warm gesture, but in his current emotional state it struck him as patronizing.

"Stop talking to me like I'm a third-grader with a crush!"

He jerked his arm to flick her hand off like a summer yellow jacket. But his swing knocked the lip of the tea tray jutting over the table edge.

The tray clattered to the floor. Cups and saucers went flying. The pot twisted in the air, ceramic top separating, expelling umber liquid in a glittering hot arc.

It splashed Caroline in the face, scalding her soft pearl skin. She clutched her cheeks, screaming with lungs more powerful than her frame. A horrific wail louder than any sound he'd ever heard.

Head lowered, he started to cry, shoulders heaving with sobs. On his knees, waist deep in the hole, his huge hands rested on his thighs, palms up as if in supplication, the skin of his fingers tattered, the whorls of his identity shredded.

He didn't think he could dig any further, he was so tired. His fingers only scraped hard earth, dirt and pebbles spilling back into the hole.

The flashlight beam finally winked out, leaving him in darkness, perhaps a foretaste of his own stygian doom.

He couldn't believe he'd let it get this far.

Overreacted. Should have had better control. She didn't mean it. I deserve this.

He lifted his head, took a breath. Opened his eyes to the stars above.

Help me, God. Help me. It was nothing more than a selfish prayer, one for his own immediate welfare. But he wasn't strong enough to be anything but selfish.

He grabbed the flashlight. Shook it. Its beam fluttered, so dim he could stare right into the lens, but good enough.

He pulled free the rock he'd partially unearthed, raised it above his head with both hands, and slammed it down as hard as he could. Its broken edge a cutting implement, hacking at packed earth, breaking it away in dark chunks.

He tossed them out of the hole and shoveled deeper, ever deeper.

"Stop screaming!" he barked.

But she wouldn't, still clutching her burned face, where translucent blisters clustered like insect eggs. She took another deep, wracking breath, her small chest swelling like a bellows. Then she screamed again, piercing the night.

"Knock it off!"

Something out of the corner of his eye. He glanced out her side window through diaphanous curtains as light flared in a window next door, a silhouette growing as it neared the rectangle frame.

He ducked away from her window, gripping her by the arms, pleading.

"Caroline . . . be quiet!" A reprimanding whisper.

She struck out blindly, clawing his face with her nails. One jabbed him below the eye, causing him to yelp and lash out defensively.

It was more a shove than a blow, making her stumble backward, her body twisting, one foot caught under the coffee table. A snapping of bone, perhaps ankle or vertebrae, and her torso bent awkwardly, skull striking the hardwood floor like a dropped honeydew.

A gurgle deep in her throat, then the screaming stopped.

He gasped, bending to check her, but froze halfway, a street mime watering an invisible plant. There was nothing he could do for her, broken like a crash-test dummy.

He considered his options, didn't like any. Glanced over his shoulder at her window, the one looking out upon the neighbor's house.

Turn out the light? No, too suspicious. Especially following an abruptly silenced scream.

He straightened himself, turned, and walked past her window, laughing and talking as if in mid conversation. "Stay right there, hon. I'll get it," he said, or words to that effect. Playing a role, over-acting like a ham in an Equity showcase.

He didn't dare look out the window as he passed, fearing the nosy neighbor might still be watching.

He ducked and circled back around the room in a crouch, back to the scene of the accident, which is how he was thinking of it. But he knew he had killed her, simple as murder, because ten minutes ago he'd been angry enough to do it. He'd *wanted* to do it, which made it worse—a mortal sin—an old catechism lesson echoing up from the deep black waters of his past.

Body first, then the cleanup.

It sprang into his mind unbidden, but welcome nonetheless. No time for soul-searching, no time to contemplate the long-term spiritual ramifications of his actions. Not now.

She was dead, that was that.

He was at fault; if not completely, then partially. But looking at her scalded face, her twisted body, he realized this could be considered an accident only in a most morbid comedy.

Deal with the body. He would keep himself free from the laws of man so he may atone with his Maker at a later date. Yes, that was it.

Roll her up in the throw rug? No, someone might notice it missing. There was no blood, none that he could see, no reason to get rid of the rug.

Tentatively, he felt under her head, only a lump on the rear of her scalp, but no cuts. Those big green eyes of hers, staring up at him.

He flinched, backed away. Grabbed his jacket off the coat rack, laid it across her face and shoulders.

Wincing, he disengaged her pretzeled ankle from the leg of the coffee table, cursing her for being barefoot. Her flesh was already cool to the touch.

He thought for a moment. Caroline had no garage, but she did have a fenced-in back yard. He could possibly back his car up to her rear gate and . . .

Yes, it might work.

First he went out to her back porch and disconnected the motion detector lamp. Now the small back yard was murky and quiet but for a dog down the block, yipping at a possum.

He hustled back through the house, once again passing the side

window, this time chuckling with appropriate body language, nothing as bad as daytime soaps. He didn't know if the nosy neighbor was still watching and he didn't care anymore, his concern focused elsewhere.

He went out to his car and drove the other way down the block, the long way, to avoid the nosy neighbor's house. He pulled into the alley that cut behind the row of homes and killed his headlights.

The alleyway was paved but not well trafficked. Weeds grew along the edges. On one side was a weathered wood fence, on the other a high hedge.

He parked with his trunk only feet away from Caroline's back fence, but he'd forgotten to unlock the gate and would now have to spend more precious time walking down the alley, up the street to her front door, then through the house to unlock it. Or drive around again, no less suspicious.

Stupid. Rushing things, not thinking it through.

He glanced to Caroline's other neighbor across the alley. The upper floor looked down on her back yard, but the high window was dark, and he prayed it would stay that way.

A prayer to not be discovered. *Is that a proper thing to ask of the Lord?* He wondered.

He backtracked down the alley, this time on foot, and walked down the block. Ignoring baser instinct, he kept his pace at a casual clip, as relaxed as he could under the circumstances, figuring it would be more suspect if he were to be jogging in street clothes at this late hour.

I've walked in this neighborhood before, they've seen me. This is normal, isn't it?

Just get it done. Get it over with.

Back into the front door and through the house, this time avoiding the side window.

He leaned over, gripping Caroline under the arms and dragging her out of the living room, through the kitchen to the back porch. Draped over her face, one lapel of his jacket dragged the linoleum, leaving fine, gray dust on the makeshift shroud.

He left her by the back door and walked swiftly through the darkened back yard to the high gate. He slid back the locking bolt and swung the door open as quietly as he could. Digging keys from his front pocket, he unlocked the car trunk. It lifted like a hungry, toothless maw.

Back through the yard to the porch. Propping the door open with a paint can, he lifted dear dead Caroline into his arms, thankful she was so light and petite and not like the Valkyries he normally favored.

But she grew heavier with each step across the yard, her corpse conspiring with gravity to deter him. Or perhaps it was the dead weight of his guilty conscience.

As he laid her into the trunk, one of her feet caught on the lip. He wrestled to free it, banging his head on the trunk lid. He swore under his breath.

He looked down at her childlike form and reached in to tuck a coattail under her pale white arm. Then he slammed the trunk shut.

Once more through the yard, the back porch, the kitchen. He glanced at the clock, the wings on the rooster just shy of one A.M.

He wondered if he should straighten up the accident scene now or when he got back.

His question was answered as he entered the living room and found someone waiting for him.

He gave up with the rock, heaving it out of the hole with leaden arms. The moist dirt was softer down here. He could scoop it out by the handful, with all the strength his arms had left, that of cooked noodles.

He had to keep digging. The hole wasn't nearly big enough. Not nearly deep enough.

The flashlight propped on the lip of the grave, its beam so very dim, finally expired for good.

It hardly mattered. His eyes had grown accustomed to the limpid ray. Even in complete forest dark he could still make out his lumpy, mud-covered hands. Clump by clump they extracted, inch by inch. But he was so weak, so very weak, his arms quivering and nearly useless.

She didn't deserve it, not at all. I've been so stupid.

He lifted more out of the hole. His arms now felt like anchors, in each palm a tablespoon of dirt weighed three tons.

~~He set the dirt on the edge of the grave, and half the pebbles tumbled back in.~~

Car headlights suddenly flared in his face, stinging his dilated pupils, the ache thudding off the back of his brain.

It was his own car, still parked nearby, engine off.

"Hurry it up," said a voice, like ash scraping off burnt toast. "I don't want to kill the battery."

A figure approached; a giant dark thing in the headlight beam. Kneeling at the edge of the grave, it looked down at him, face a mask of controlled rage.

It was Caroline's brother, Dex. A pistol in his hand.

"I have to use that car to get back home. I'll dump it later.

Somewhere far away, the airport's long-term parking or something. Maybe a Wal-Mart or Home Depot." An ironic grin, barely discernible in the sharp contrast of halogen and ink-dark night.

Dex stood over the busted tea set. Gun pointed gut-level.

"Where is she?"

It was over, it was done. He couldn't fight it.

"In the car," he'd said. "The trunk."

Dex's shoulders slumped, resigned yet not surprised.

"What are you doing here, Dex?" he said weakly, as if hiding in the back of a dark closet.

"Guy next door called me when he heard the screams. He's a friend of mine. I told him to keep an eye on Caroline. I never liked you. I never trusted you. Never did."

He'd hung his head then.

"Forget the police. You could put your business up for collateral to afford a high-powered lawyer, and I don't want to take the chance you'll skate. So here's what's going to happen . . ." Gun in hand, his sister dead, he was remarkably calm and assured. "You're going to bring her back in here and lay her where she fell, here on the floor. Just as if you did it and took off running like a sniveling coward.

"Then you and me are going to take a drive."

So this was it. Out here in the middle of the woods in the dead of night. Digging a grave for a body.

I deserve this.

Man's law, or perhaps his justice, risen up to trump his future punishment from God.

Maybe that's as it should be.

And maybe my brother will somehow find out about this and come hunting Dex. Two vengeful brothers fighting it out.

But he knew it would never happen. He wouldn't be found out here for years and years. If ever.

"Go on. Keep digging. I want you nice and deep." Headlights glinted off the pistol barrel and the gleam of clenched teeth.

Will he have mercy and shoot me first, or will he bury me alive?

He closed his eyes to say one final, selfish prayer. ♡

THE PASSENGER

JOHN C. BOLAND

Spreading the map under the dash light, Paula said, "I'm sorry, your navigator was dozing." As they sat in the breakdown lane, she hunched over the printed sheet, tracing the turnpike through its numerous turnoffs. The finger found a dot in an empty stretch. "Take the next exit. Mill Creek Highway crosses Route 30. We'll be all right."

"If we don't slide into a snowbank," Herb Moss said.

"We'll backtrack about ten miles." She kept the map open.

When they left the interstate, it was twenty after four. At the junction, neon lights announced country bars, gas stations, motels with vacancies. Off the highway, Herb Moss glimpsed a water park with its slides cloaked in snow. A log building with Indian souvenirs on the porch gushed smoke from a metal chimney. Mill Creek Highway, they found, hadn't been plowed that afternoon.

They crossed an iron bridge, passed a cluster of forlorn houses. The grayness rode with them in the car, suppressing conversation. Paula huddled in, brushing contact with his arm, face pale, arms tucked into the opposing sleeves of her parka. Her lips had gotten chapped over the last couple of days, and her gaiety had faded into subdued watchfulness as the cold sank through sweaters and silk underwear. They weren't young anymore, though not yet middle-aged, and Paula felt the cold. The brochure had made the mountains look romantic, an invitation to cuddly intimacy. The reality pushed them apart. In their room on the second floor of the Spruce Mountain Lodge the sheets were dank, and as he rose from fitful sleep after midnight, Herb had felt his wife shivering.

Watching the road, she murmured, "We shouldn't have gone out today."

He agreed, but he didn't answer.

They had driven east, then north, to tour one of the mansions overlooking the Hudson. It had been closed since the 1950s, according to the woman who conducted them through the high-ceilinged ballrooms and dining rooms. There had been plans to



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tear down the building until a historical group bought it for renovation. A large man was sanding a floor in an empty, spacious room. From its tall windows, Herb Moss and his wife could see through the lace of snow the slow-moving gray floes of the river.

"It's beautiful," Paula told their hostess.

"I wouldn't live anywhere else," the woman responded.

A confirmed urbanite, Herb had wondered if their lives would be changed if they lived this far from the city. Did places impart rhythms that defined the inhabitants, pacing the blood, scheduling passions, or was it the other way around? He tried to picture himself living at the edge of an Adirondack town. There would be no afternoons with a pretty, young student at a museum or evenings at the concert hall, no cutting edge plays in black-painted storefronts. He would drive the family SUV on Saturday mornings to a regional shopping mall, return to a warm living room full of his books, maybe to an early glass of scotch, and he noticed that the vague image of a woman who hovered somewhere in this fantasy did not resemble Paula.

"How far?" he asked.

"I think we're about eight miles from Wheeler."

He nodded. They hadn't slid into a snowbank. Glancing over a stone wall into a sloping pasture, he saw a small truck with a plow laboring up what could have been a private road. Once they reached Route 30, the roads would be cleared. He could decide whether this would be their last night at the lodge, whether they would go home tomorrow and hire lawyers. He felt as remote from her as the cold spaces made one huddled-in village distant from another. She may have believed things were okay. Either she thought he didn't know about Grady, or she believed he was willing to pretend not to know. How well you pretended was what mattered in much of their life.

Grady was charming, and Herb Moss had been right to distrust charm. He detested it in students. Charm was a talent cultivated by people who didn't want to work hard. Herb believed it sheltered many other character flaws as well, nasty little habits that sprang up in the human soul like toadstools in the shade.

He saw the deer, half starved and slack shouldered, in time to slow to avoid it, but as the car swerved he felt a pull against the steering as the back wheels skated on packed snow. There was a thump as the car made contact with a roadside snow mound, which slowed them to a crawl. He steered back to his own side of the road. All the way he felt the thud-thud of a bent wheel. He stopped, put on flashers.

"You okay?"

Paula nodded. Of course she was okay.

He got out, glanced down the road. This would be exactly the time for a truck to come along, gluing him to its radiator. The road was empty. He checked the trunk. It would be absurd to drive from here with the trunk lid waving like a loose tongue. The lid hadn't opened. He kicked snow off the left rear wheel, wondering how bad the damage was. He thought the wheel was visibly tilted.

It was below freezing, almost dark, and the wind was driving pellets of snow against the fenders like nails clicking.

He ducked his head into the car. "Try your phone," he said. By the time the AAA truck arrived, it would be dark. And very cold. A county police car might come along before then. If he could drive the car a few miles . . .

"Any signal?" he asked.

"No."

He clapped his cold hands together. As if summoned, headlights flickered behind him. The truck came slowly, its plow blade raised, chains muffled, fenders trembling, right headlamp wobbling like an eye that wanted to close. When the truck stopped beside them, a fogged window rolled down and a bearded pink face leaned out. The pits in the ripe cheeks made Herb think of exposure to salt or cinders. The driver shouted down at him.

"Are you broken down?"

"Wheel's bent," Herb Moss said. "Can you tow us?"

"Let me see." The man who climbed down from the cab wore a cap with ear flaps, a couple of shirts, but no outer jacket. He brought with him a strong odor of tobacco and coffee and a fainter smell of unwashed flannel. As he inspected the wheel, he noticed the woman in the passenger seat and gave a small wave, accompanied by a wink. At the front of the car, he felt the area under the bumper. He wasn't wearing gloves and his fingers were thick and red, as if they had been boiled.

"I don't have a chain on the truck," the man said. "Got a little rope, but I'm afraid if I tow you, we'll ruin your transmission. These foreign cars are complicated. Then when you sue, my boss will have my scalp."

"We wouldn't—"

"I'll give you a lift to Wheeler if you want. I think that'd be a good idea. They got a tow truck."

"Well . . ."

"You can't wait out here. Somebody comes along in the dark, they could drive right into you."

Paula was climbing out on her side, pressing the door against a wall of hard snow.

"We can't even get a phone signal," she said.

"Not surprised," their rescuer said. He looked at her with the clumsy greed of a man who lived alone. "There's not much on this road."

"Now you tell us." She smiled.

"Didn't know you before." He gestured past Herb at the car's trunk. "You got any luggage?"

"It's at our hotel," Herb said.

"Climb in then. I'm Floyd, by the way. Good thing I was out this way clearing driveways. You could've frozen waiting for the next guy."

They squeezed into the truck cab, Herb at the window, his wife between them. As Floyd got the truck moving, she shifted a couple of times, snuggling her hip against the stranger's.

"Do you work in Wheeler?" she asked.

"Guy who owns the truck lives in Wheeler. I do a little driving for him."

"Do you think there's a taxi in Wheeler? We're staying at the Spruce Mountain Lodge."

"Where's that?"

"Route 30."

"Oh . . . those places are expensive. Should've figured from your car." He rubbed his nose on the back of a hand. "We ain't got taxis, but somebody'll drive you up. Don't worry."

Paula adjusted herself. "I'm not worried."

Floyd looked at her, and then looked away quickly.

Wheeler turned out to be bigger than Herb had expected, with a large gas plaza cutting a bright hole in the night, a small Italian restaurant blinking a red chef's hat onto the sidewalk, a drugstore with hair-color advertisements in the window. Floyd drove the truck right up to the service station's front door, left the engine running, and set the brake. "Let's see what we can do," he said and sprang down.

Herb Moss climbed down, felt ice prickle his forehead. He could see it falling, freezing bits of light pilling on the truck fender. He helped his wife down, held her arm even when she was on the ground.

Absently, she said, "Thank you," and steadied herself on him as they rounded the truck. "You could break your neck tonight."

"I wonder if there's a hospital," Herb said.

"Kingston?"

"Yeah." How many miles away? "Better not break anything."

They followed Floyd into the mini-mart, onto wet cardboard. The bearded man waved to a woman behind the counter and dis-

appeared among the racks of potato chips and dog meal, toes together.

"I gotta go too," Paula said.

Herb glanced at a clock over the door. It was barely five thirty. The short days fooled him. At seven he would feel like it was ten. After that it didn't matter, it would just be night, however long it lasted.

Floyd came back as Herb was pouring coffee, accepted a large container, and went over to the counter. "Where's Marty and the truck?" he asked. "These folks' car broke down."

The woman had big blue eyes, blue-glossed lips, blond hair held in a scrunchie. "Marty's got the truck up on the rack. Bearings shot. Ain't that something?"

"His timing's something," Floyd agreed.

"We got twenty calls tonight, and he's out of luck. Mad as heck."

"Don't blame him."

"Is there another tow truck in town?" Herb asked.

"Just ours," the woman said.

"We'll have to call Triple A."

"That's us too." She slapped a blue-lined pad onto the counter. "You write the details for me, Marty'll get you hauled in by tomorrow afternoon. Where you stayin'? Put that down. Phone number. What you think's wrong. You didn't leave valuables?"

"No." Herb thought about that answer. He imagined the tow truck owner bringing the car to the station, opening it up, starting to work on it. There were no valuables, but . . . "If Marty could just tow the car up to the Spruce Mountain Lodge, that would be ideal."

"That'll cost you."

"No problem. I'll give you credit card information. I'd like to have the work done by our regular mechanic, you understand."

"Makes no difference to me. Let me swipe your card."

"And can we get a ride?"

Paula came back, leaned on the counter so that her rump pointed a little at Floyd, who had found a chili dog. The bearded man sauntered back to the counter. "If no one tells my boss, guess I could give you a lift. Being as you're stuck."

"That'd be just wonderful," Paula said.

When they went outside, Floyd speculated on whether the interstate would be closed. "You get some of those rigs blastin' downhill, when they hit ice and jackknife, they take out everything in three lanes. We'll just go this way up to Route 30, okay?"

"Okay."

"Whaddya do when you get your car? Have it towed home?"

"I guess."

"Might be cheaper to have Marty fix it."

"That might void the warranty," Herb said.

Floyd nodded. "You don't want to do that."

Spruce Mountain Lodge was lit up like a Christmas tree, the better to lure visitors who didn't know how cold the rooms could be. They said goodnight to Floyd, Herb handing over a suitable amount of money, complimenting the bearded man on his driving. The roads were as glazed as frozen rivers. In another hour, Herb thought, they would have had to find a room in Wheeler.

"Early dinner or late?" Paula asked from the bathroom.

"Late," Herb said. "We need to warm up these sheets."

"Late is good." She came out of the bathroom, eyes bright, smile lascivious. She thought things were okay. Probably imagined she could take up with Grady again when she got home.

When they went down to dinner, Herb felt flushed and exhausted and almost content. He ordered a good bottle of wine and raised a glass to her. "I guess we'll be here a few days longer. Here's to making the most of it."

"Here's to us," she said.

But when he came out of the bathroom much later, she was just closing her phone, and he knew she had been trying to call somebody.

A burly, middle-aged sheriff's deputy interrupted breakfast. In deference to the lodge's genteel atmosphere, he took off his hat when entering the dining room. "Mr. and Mrs. Moss? I'm here about your car."

Herb's fork stayed at the same place it had been when he saw the deputy enter the room. He tried out answers in his mind. "Our car?" "Our *car*?" He looked at the man across a forkful of food he didn't recognize. "Yes?"

"We didn't find out till this morning. An out-of-state guy slammed his pickup truck into your vehicle overnight. There was an explosion and fire. 'Fraid your car's totaled."

"Oh," said Herb.

"Be glad you weren't in it. Both guys in the pickup were thrown from their vehicle. Only the blood spray showed us where they landed in the snow." He glanced sideways at Paula. "Sorry, ma'am. One guy, I shouldn't tell you this, but one guy didn't have any clothes on. Haven't found an ID for him either."

He watched Herb's eyes, smiled a little. "You didn't have a naked guy in your car?"

"Our car?"

"He could've been in either vehicle. It was pretty bad." He cast a faint bad-boy grin at the woman.

"Sorry, Officer," said Herb.

"Nothing to be sorry about. We'll get you an accident report for your insurance company."

"Are we in any trouble, leaving the car on the road?"

"You were broken down. What could you do? The pickup was driving too fast."

"A man was naked?" Paula asked. "In this weather?"

The deputy nodded, pretending to be solemn. "Makes me wonder which guy was driving."

He left and Paula suppressed a laugh with both hands. "That's too weird," she said.

They rented a new car and found that when they wore warmer clothes the Spruce Mountain Lodge was quite comfortable. Each evening, they sat near the fire in the library, easy in their renewed intimacy. They avoided road trips. At least once a day, when Herb was otherwise occupied, Paula used her phone to try to call her lover. ♡

HOW TO SOLVE AN ACROSTIC

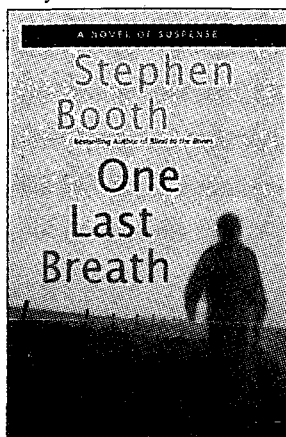
Using the definitions, fill in as many words as you can in the column on the right. Then transfer the letters from the column to their corresponding places in the diagram. A black square in the diagram indicates the end of a word. When completed, the diagram will yield a mystery-themed quotation. The initial letters of the words in the righthand column spell out the name of the author and the work from which the quote was taken.

BOOKED & PRINTED

ROBERT C. HAHN

This month, three writers from the British Isles bring gritty and witty crimes novels to the States.

Stephen Booth continues to impress with his Peak District procedurals featuring mismatched Derbyshire C.I.D. detectives Ben Cooper and Diane Fry. In **ONE LAST BREATH** (Bantam, \$25), the fifth entry in the series, their current case reaches back to an old murder investigated by Ben's father. That case proves as labyrinthine as the Peak District cave system that sets the backdrop for the series.



When Mansell Quinn was found in his home with the bloody body of his lover, he was arrested, and when he confessed, he was sentenced to a lengthy term in prison. Although he later recanted his confession, he served his time in full, with few visits from his wife (who divorced him) or anyone else. Now he has been released, and he promises retribution.

While the force tries to locate Quinn and figure out whom he might target in his quest for revenge, Ben is drawn back to the original murder and to his father's handling of the case. The application of DNA testing and the plethora of modern forensic tools to the evidence produce some puzzling discrepancies. Despite Quinn's confession, Ben begins to wonder whether Quinn really was guilty.

Booth's always solid plotting proves absorbing. As Quinn eludes capture in the rugged hills and valleys of the area, Ben and Diane peel away layer upon layer to arrive at the startling nugget of truth.

WHY WE DIE (Carroll & Graf, \$25.95) is Mick Herron's third mystery, and it is filled with wonderfully offbeat characters, starting with the resourceful, relentless, and resilient London P.I. Zoë Boehm. Among the oddballs making life difficult for Zoë are three mismatched criminal brothers; a would-be suicide who is diverted by the impulse to rescue a battered wife; a disgraced and discharged ex-cop who blames Zoë for all his troubles; and a female

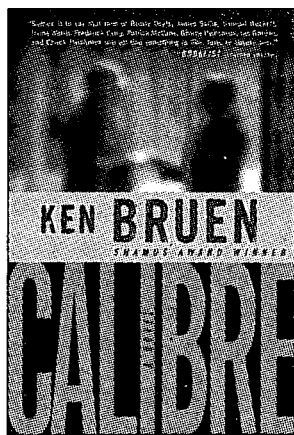
chauffer/bodyguard, Win, built like a line-backer but lithe and shrewd as well.

Zoë's troubles start with a tax audit and escalate rapidly. A resolutely low-tech private detective, Zoë may not have much overhead, but as she explains with embarrassment to a financial advisor, neither has she had much work lately. Given her precarious financial situation, Zoë is ripe for the unorthodox offer made by the owner of a jewelry store whose losses in a bizarre robbery were somewhat greater than he could admit to the police.

The result is an adventure written with great flair and dark humor, and a coherent and surprising plot that transports Zoë Boehm into the top rank of female P.I.'s. A highly recommended addition to prospective reading lists.

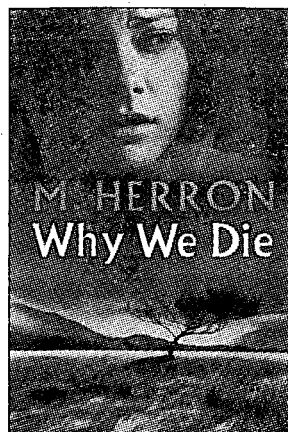
Irishman Ken Bruen's rapidly expanding output shows the author to be as much at home in London as in Dublin; wherever his stories are set they are razor sharp. Bruen's prose is muscular and raw, as we saw in his writing about Jack Taylor, an ex-cop in Ireland's elite police force (Garda Síochána) in such memorable novels as *The Killing of the Tinkers* (St. Martin's Minotaur, 2005).

Following last year's *Vixen*, *CALIBRE* (St. Martin's Minotaur, \$12.95), a fast-paced thriller, brings back Detective Sergeant Brant and Chief Inspector Roberts of the Southeast London Police to



hunt a serial killer who bumps people off because they are rude. Spare and funny at the same time, *Calibre* recalls Ed McBain's *87th Precinct* series in the way it orchestrates an ensemble of colorful supporting characters; these include a cop on the verge of being dismissed who concocts a dilly of a frame-up to redeem himself, and two cops who participate in an unforgettable "Meet the Kids" in-school performance. And that's without even beginning to describe the antics of the inimitable Brant, who gives new dimension to the term "dirty cop." Bruen

pays homage to earlier noir writers such as Jim Thompson, Cornell Woolrich, Charles Willeford, and McBain while spinning a dazzling tale of a serial killer who's perhaps not as crazy as the cops he's up against.



Kelly Braffet's second foray into suspense, *LAST SEEN LEAVING* (Houghton Mifflin, \$23) is the story of one mother's search for her estranged, missing daughter. The daughter, Miranda, is a brooding drifter in her twenties who is picked up along a darkened highway after wrecking her car on the way to work. Her savior, George, is nice but somehow *off*, in that can't-quite-put-your-finger-on-it kind of way. Given the opportunity, Miranda decides to transplant her life to the resort town where George is headed—the same town where young girls are washing up mutilated on the beach. Soon three months have passed since Miranda's mother, Anne, has heard from her, and Anne sets out to find her apparently vanished daughter. And as George's character reappears again and again, with escalating creepiness, the reader senses that Anne's search is gaining urgency.

Here the plot is framed as a missing-persons thriller, but as the process of searching for a lost loved one is often no more than a waiting game, Braffet spends most of the novel exploring the concurrent emotional experiences of both mother and daughter, and reveals through lucid flashback how the two women came to be estranged.

Braffet also homed in on the tensions that can run amok in family relationships in last year's *Josie and Jack* (Mariner Books, \$13), which examined a brother-sister relationship that bordered on psychosis, where the line between sibling love and romantic love often blurred. Braffet's prose is suspenseful and heartfelt. *Last Seen Leaving* is an engrossing portrayal of one dysfunctional family cast into tragedy.

—Nicole K. Sia

ALL POINTS BULLETIN: Edward D. Hoch's newest collection, *MORE THINGS IMPOSSIBLE: THE SECOND CASEBOOK OF DR. SAM HAWTHORNE* (Crippen & Landru, \$18), came out in paperback in early July. • Out since September, *THE WIDOW OF SLANE* (Carroll & Graf, \$16.95), an anthology showcasing the best crime and mystery novellas of 2004, edited by Ed Gorman and Martin H. Greenberg, features tales from AHMM alums such as Doug Allyn, Clark Howard, and Steve Hockensmith. • Joan Druett's latest mystery at sea, *RUN AFOUL* (\$23.95), was published by St. Martin's Minotaur this October. • *HIGH HEELS ARE MURDER* (\$6.99), a Josie Marcus shopping mystery from Elaine Viets, is out in November from Signet Mystery • Bookspan's new imprint Madison Park Press, which publishes titles made available exclusively to members of Bookspan's book clubs, debuted with J. F. Freedman's legal thriller *A KILLING IN THE VALLEY* last August.

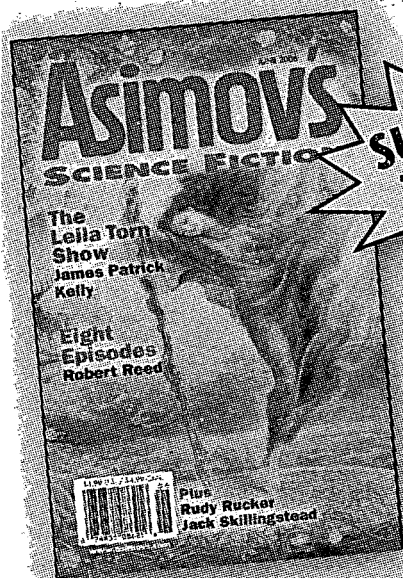
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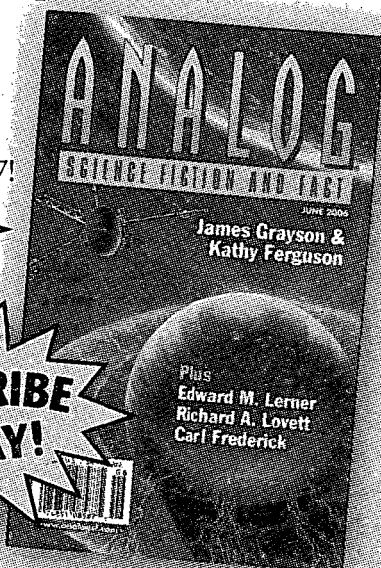
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THE MIGHTY QUINN

Alice Woforth wore her long hair in a braid down the middle of her back, and across the distance from my desk to my office doorway it looked blonde and she looked young and scared, like a teenager meeting her boyfriend's parents for the first time.

"Mr. Quinn?" she said haltingly.

"Come on in, Mrs. Woforth," I said. I swept my hand toward the chair beside my desk.

She tried a quick smile. It failed. She gave me a little self-deprecating shrug and crossed the room. She was slim, tall, erect.

"Have a seat," I said. "Relax. Coffee or something?"

She shook her head. "No. No, thank you. Nothing."

Up close I saw that there was more gray than blonde in her hair, and the skin over her high cheekbones and at the corner of her pale green eyes was crosshatched with tiny lines. She hadn't been a teenager for quite a while. I pegged her in her mid-fifties.

I leaned back in my chair. "So," I said. "How can I help you?"

Her small teeth chewed on her bottom lip. She stared down at her hands, which were wrestling with each other in her lap. "I think this is a big fat mistake," she said softly.

"Could be," I said. "Hardly ever is, but it could be."

She looked up at me. "I guess I will have some coffee."

I got up and went to the Mr. Coffee machine in the corner. As I stood there with my back to her, pouring two mugs full, I said, "Your husband, is it?"

"I don't know. Yes."

I brought back our coffee. She took one of the mugs and held it in both of her hands. She lowered her face to it and sipped.

I laced my fingers behind my neck and waited.

"I feel so . . . disloyal," she murmured.

"But you feel like you've got to know."

She nodded. "Yes." A whisper.

"Not knowing," I said. "That's what's hard. And if you don't do it, you'll never know. You won't ever be happy again until you know."

She nodded.

"But you think it's sleazy, coming to a private investigator."

"Oh, I didn't mean—"

I waved my hand in the air. "It's okay. See, Mrs. Wolforth, I think of myself as a social worker. I try to help people with their problems. Now, your problem is not knowing about your husband. As long as you don't know, you're going to be unhappy. Well, my job is to make you happy. Okay?"

She peered up at me, her mouth still hovering at the rim of her coffee mug. "I can't stand not knowing anymore," she said. "I hate suspecting him. He's—we've been married for thirty-one years."

"And this is the first time you've . . ."

She smiled quickly. "Oh, yes. It's been quite . . . we've got five grandchildren, Mr. Quinn. Thomas has always . . . Oh, that old idiot." She lowered her head and touched her fingers to her cheek, but not before I saw the tears well up in her eyes. She put the mug onto my desk. "I should go right now," she said.

"That's fine."

She stared at me for a moment, then picked up the mug again and took a sip. "No. I've got to know."

"You could ask him."

"But that would be like accusing him of lying, you see. He thinks I trust him. Trust has always been important to us. And if I did ask him—accuse him—and he denied it . . . do you see? I still wouldn't know. Because I guess I don't trust him. So I've got to . . ."

I shrugged. "It's up to you, Mrs. Wolforth."

"It's easy for you."

"Yes. Because I know in the long run you'll be happier."

"You've got women coming to you all the time, I guess. Needing to know."

"Men, too," I said. "About half of them are men."

"Let's do it, then. What do you need to know?"

"Why don't you just tell me about it."

Thomas Wolforth, she told me, sold insurance out of a two-man office in Concord. With the economy down and pressure coming at him from the home office, he'd started making sales calls in the evening. Not every night. Once or twice a week. He wouldn't get home until after she'd gone to bed. As if he was waiting for her to go to bed, she told me, so he wouldn't have to talk to her, to lie to her. After thirty years of marriage, she found she couldn't get to sleep without him beside her, so she always knew when he got

back. It had been getting later and later.

"Why don't you believe him?" I said.

She shrugged. "I couldn't tell you why. But I know him. It's the way he looks at me sometimes. The way he snuggles against me when he comes home late. Touches my hair, kisses the back of my neck when I'm pretending to be asleep. If I said anything, it would be to ask him where he'd been, and I don't want to hear a lie so I pretend to be sleeping so I don't have to say anything to him."

He always called when he was going to be late. Alice Wolforth told me she'd let me know the next time it happened. She gave me an envelope with twenty five-dollar bills in it.

Thursday around four thirty Alice Wolforth called me. "He just called, Mr. Quinn. He told me not to wait up."

"Okay."

"Said he's got several calls to make. He's not telling the truth. I heard it in his voice."

"Well, we'll see," I said. I hung up, grabbed my jacket, and headed out.

She had told me that Thomas Wolforth drove a one-year-old gray Taurus wagon. She had given me the plate number. I found the car in the lot behind the office building in Concord Center. I parked two rows from his car and took out the photo she had given me. Steel-gray hair combed straight back, high forehead, dark-rimmed glasses. He was fifty-eight, she had told me. About six feet tall, a little stoop-shouldered. In the photo he was smiling shyly into the camera. Alice Wolforth stood beside him with her cheek on his shoulder. She was smiling, too.

I spotted him walking toward his car around five thirty. He was carrying a briefcase. He unlocked the Taurus and put the briefcase on the back seat. Then he slid in, started up the car, and pulled out of the lot.

I let a few cars slip in between us and followed him out of town, onto the highway, and all the way to Cambridge. When he pulled into the parking garage under the Charles Hotel, I kept going. I circled the hotel three times before I went down into the garage. I found his Taurus and left my nondescript Chevy Citation several rows from his. I fished the little hand-sized Olympus 35-millimeter from the glove compartment. It was loaded with super high-speed film that made useful pictures even in the subdued light of a fancy restaurant.

I took the elevator up to the lobby, glanced around, then climbed the wide stairway up to the lounge. I spotted Thomas Wolforth seated at a corner table sipping what looked like an old

fashioned. There were plenty of empty places. I took a table that put me behind his shoulder where I could watch him without craning my neck.

I ordered a bottle of Heineken.

I saw her appear at the entry to the lounge, squint into the dim light, spot him, and wave. He lifted his hand about a foot off the table. She smiled, went to his table, and sat beside him. She leaned toward him and kissed his cheek.

I got that shot.

She was in her late twenties—about half Alice Wolforth's age. Pretty, if you like the elegant type. Tall, well-built, short black hair. She wore a narrow little navy blue skirt that rode halfway up her thigh when she sat. Under a yellow cardigan sweater was a bone-colored silk blouse unbuttoned far enough to show several gold chains at her throat. She could have been a secretary or a stockbroker or a lawyer, coming over directly from the office.

The waitress brought her a glass of white wine. The brunette and Wolforth touched glasses. She scooped herself close beside him. I could see her hand snake up onto his leg. I got those shots, too.

After fifteen or twenty minutes she stood up, touched his mouth with her forefinger, and headed toward the ladies' room. Thomas Wolforth put some bills on the table. I did the same, got up, and left. I lurked outside the lounge until they came out. They walked past me and started up the stairway. She had her arm around his waist and her head resting against his shoulder. Their hips bumped as they climbed the stairs. I followed discreetly behind them, although I doubt if they were aware of anybody else in the world except each other.

I got it all on film. I also photographed them entering the room and leaving it two hours later.

Alice Wolforth called the next day. I told her I followed him as far as Cambridge but lost him in the Harvard Square traffic. She said she knew he had clients in Cambridge, but she didn't sound very convinced.

On Tuesday she called again. He was going to be late. I said I'd try to do better.

I got to the lounge before he did this time and was already sipping a beer when he came in. He ordered his old fashioned, and it was nearly a half hour before she came in.

This time she was a blonde, shorter, less flashy than the brunette, but equally elegant.

She drank white wine, too.

They used the same room upstairs.

I got all the photographs.

The next time it was a blonde again, but a different one. I didn't bother taking any pictures.

When they came out of the lounge, I stepped forward and said, "Mr. Wolforth?"

He frowned at me. "Yes?"

"May I speak to you for a minute, sir?"

"Who are you?"

"The name's Quinn." I handed him my card. It reads, "Quinn: Discreet Investigations." Phone number. Simple and eloquent.

He glanced at it, glanced at me, glanced at the blonde.

"What do you want?"

I shrugged.

He stared at me for a minute. Then he fumbled in his pocket and drew out a room key. He handed it to the blonde. "Meet me up there," he told her.

She took the key and went up the stairs. Wolforth watched her go, then turned to me. "Okay, Mr. Quinn. What is it?"

"Pretty nice," I said, jerking my head in the direction of the blonde.

He didn't say anything.

"I thought the brunette was the best looking of the bunch, though," I said. "I'm partial to brunettes, myself."

"Look—"

"Consider me a social worker, Mr. Wolforth," I said. "People come to me with their problems, and I try to solve them. I like to see people happy. If I can make people happy, I figure I've done my job, and the world's a better place. Understand?"

He cocked his head and frowned at me.

I took out the photographs of the brunette and the first blonde and dealt him the one off the top. He squinted at it, then looked at me. I nodded.

We dickered a little, standing there outside the lounge. I settled for five grand cash for the negatives and prints. We also agreed to certain other considerations.

We met at the lounge at the Charles Hotel the next afternoon and completed the transaction. He was a gentleman the whole way. We shook hands when we parted. He even thanked me.

Alice Wolforth sat beside my desk and played with the snap of her purse.

"Take it easy, Mrs. Wolforth," I said. "I'm not going to drag this out."

"I knew it."

"No," I said. "Your husband is a good, honorable man."

She stared at me. "Really?"

I smiled. "Really."

"You mean—"

I nodded.

Tears brimmed in her eyes. "I'm so relieved. I can't thank you enough, Mr. Quinn."

I shrugged. "I'm glad it worked out this way."

It's been over a year now, and I'm still keeping an eye on Thomas Wolforth, giving him more than his five grand's worth. He's never gone back to the Charles Hotel—or any other hotel, for that matter. I didn't think he would. We have a deal, and he's an honorable man.

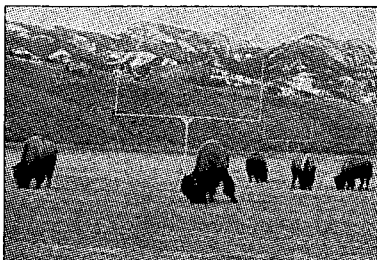
And I think he's happy about it. I know Mrs. Wolforth is. I am, too, for that matter. It worked out well. I like it when I can make people happy. 🐦



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THE STORY THAT WON

The June Mysterious Photograph contest was won by Benjamin H. Foreman of Harbor Oaks, Florida. Honorable mentions go to James E. Spitzer of Rochester Hills, Michigan; Karin Beers of Auburn, New York; J. F. Peirce of Bryan, Texas; Art Cosing of Fairfax, Virginia; Mike Befeler of Boulder, Colorado; Charles Schaeffer of Bethesda, Maryland; Adrian Ludens of Rapid City, South Dakota; Christopher Love of Jamaica, New York; Thomas H. Beaven of Garden City, Michigan; and James A. Knoop of Clay, Michigan.



Tom Murphy/National Geographic/Getty Images

BUFFALO WINGS

BENJAMIN H. FOREMAN

"Did you get all of them?" Mr. B. asked, as a pothole caught the right front tire of his Ford Ranger. The wheel snapped to the right. He struggled to regain control and missed the guardrail by an inch.

Mousey nodded his long, rat-shaped head up and down vigorously. "Just like you said, Mr. B. Two per makes five hundred big ones. They're stashed at Moss High on the football field."

"Good man, Mousey." Mr. B. slapped him on the back. "With us winning that contract and tonight being the biggest game of the year, we'll sell out our entire stock of wings. At a hundred percent profit, we'll clean up. Dang!" The Ranger hit another pothole. "You done real good, Mousey, heisting all them birds."

Mousey's hand slicked long, black hair back over his sloping forehead several times. His sharp nose jutted upward. His lips pursed round as a donut. Tentatively, he said, "Mr. B., sir, that's a strange name to describe that herd I sort of borrowed from old man Richardson's place."

"Herd?" Mr. B.'s head turned slowly, eyes bulging, resembling watermelons. The Ranger rounded the corner of Moss High. He slammed on the brakes and barked, "What's this?!" He rapped his knuckles in Mousey's chest twice, hard. "I wanted five hundred chickens! Do those look like chickens to you?"

"Ch— chickens?" Mousey stammered. "You said you were serving buffalo wings, so . . ." he wiggled his fingers at the herd of buffalo grazing peacefully on the ball field.

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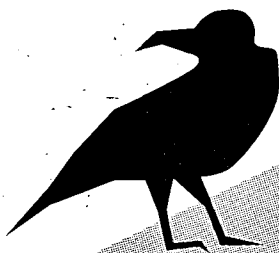
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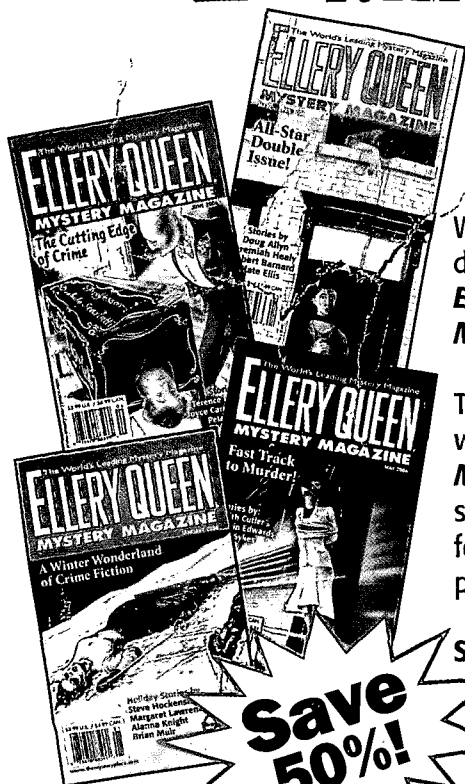
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